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## HIS ONLY LOVE







# HIS ONLY LOVE

BY

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## CHAPTER I

### HIMM'S EARLY LIFE

HIMM is the pet abbreviation for Himmat Singh, which, in the language of Ind, means "A brave lion"—or "A lion in bravery." It was a name which the old village astrologer bestowed upon the only son of an obscure villager, who tilled his field and got out of it what little sustenance he could.

Nagina was a small hamlet in the hills of the plateau districts of India, while Rup Singh, the farmer, was a small tenant of an oppressive landlord who rackrented him.

In order to please the Sahibs who looked upon education with a favoured eye, Dhanjit Prasad Malguzar had set apart a dilapidated portion of the verandah of his shrine, to serve as the village battiashala, or primary school. The teacher was his henchman and factotum, Pandit Ishwar Das, who wrote his accounts, knew how to falsify them to his master's advantage, was an adept in the preparation of deeds, officiated as the priest accredited to the Thakur, in whose porch the village urchins mastered the arcana of reading and writing, elementary addition and subtraction.

Himm was an unruly pupil, being more fond of playing truant or practising pranks upon his Guru, who presided at the teaching stall. They were ten boys in all ; but most of them, unlike Himm, were

reverential to their teacher, and attentive to their slates. They used no paper, for it was scarce and dear. Slates could be washed by being spat upon, but paper would not stand that ordeal.

The course lasted three years, at the end of which the pupil sought other schools in the neighbourhood. But to most of them three years was more than enough. The pupils paid a varying sum in cash or kind for their education ; the fee fixed was one anna per month, but parents shirked having to pay that impost, so the priestly teacher employed the lads on odd jobs every day, in collecting wood for his cooking, grass for his cow, and peepul leaves for his goat. Those who belonged to the higher castes fetched water from the well, while those who could not be employed on this privileged mission had to rest content with removing from the walls of unwary housewives half-dried dung cakes with which to cook their master's banquet. The village school had earned a notoriety with the neighbours, who viewed it with suspicion, as a herd of young pilferers who made gaps in their thorn fences, removed the straw for their cattle, and generally made rural life insecure.

Himm was a captain of the team, and all eyes turned on him as the arch-culprit. Whenever a peasant lost his cow, Himm was held answerable for it. He made long tramps in search of the animal which he had not stolen, but which he had to find. Incidentally he became an expert in tracking stray cattle. As the cattle were neither tethered nor penned, he was constantly on the move in search of other people's cows, bullocks, goats or donkeys. That was when he was a youngster of ten.

A grocer who was on a visit to the Malguzar had lost his pony, so Himm was set to find it. The pony had bolted, and Himm could not trace it ; but he had become an expert tracker and could see from the trail of the hoofs that the pony had made for his home. The traveller had ridden it some ten miles on business—he was a Bania, who paid weekly visits to the village to collect his debts, sell salt and turmeric to the housewives on credit, and provide them with saris and dhotis, for which he often made exorbitant charges. His cargo was carried on the pony's back. He could not walk back to his shop without the cargo, so Himm was held in ransom to find his pony and transport his goods.

Himm was a dare-devil scamp and was glad of the chance to get away from parental control. He egged the Bania on to persuade Ishwar Das, and the teacher had no difficulty in assuring Rup Singh that Himm must be told off to escort the Bania back to his village. Himm caught hold of a donkey in a field, loaded it with the Bania's stock in trade, and set off with him to his shop.

The boy did not return ! Rup Singh was disconsolate, and accused Ishwar Das of being privy to the theft of his son. He threatened to break his skull, which he could not do, as Ishwar was a holy man and the redeemer of all Nagina. Ishwar told him to go to Modigaon, where the Bania lived and where he was sure to find his truant son.

Rup Singh acted upon his advice, but Himm was not there. The Bania told him that he had found his pony grazing in his back-yard, so he did not dare to detain Himm. Moreover, he did not see why he should undertake the feeding of other people's

children ; so Himm had been given his exeat, and he had two witnesses to prove his word.

Rup Singh could not believe otherwise than that his son had strayed back to Nagina. He returned home but found Himm was still absent, while his wife was crying for her missing son. She did so at the well where the assembled junto of the village dames opined that he must have been devoured by a tiger. It is true that an old tigress had haunted the neighbourhood, and Himm could not have escaped her attention. It was agreed that he had fallen a prey to the tigress, who personified the goddess of smallpox and exacted a toll from the village of its little children.

The village astrologer cast Himm's horoscope to the same conclusion. This was final ! There was nothing else to do but to lament the fate of one who had, in some measure, sacrificed his life in abating the scourge. The rains had set in and smallpox was disappearing. Himm was the cause ! The goddess Kali had taken her toll and had disappeared. Himm was lost to his parents, forgotten by the villagers, and ceased to be cursed by the peasants even when they lost their cattle.

Himm had visited Modigaon with the Bania, and when they found his pony, he wanted the Bania to stand him a meal. But the Bania started a volley of abuse for causing him all this trouble, and losing his custom. He was an unhangd scapegrace who deserved no pity.

Himm saw that the Bania was a determined man, and that any further argument with him would call for a forcible retort. He mounted the donkey he had picked up from no man's land in the village

waste, and rode it to the neighbouring wayside serai, three miles off, on which stood a small railway station. The boy asked the caravaneers if he might clean their cooking-pots ; they were glad of his services, and threw him offals which they had collected for the dogs. He ate them, and feeling refreshed, he forgot the donkey and walked into the waiting-room of the shed used as the station.

Himm had no idea what he was doing—all he knew was that he was getting farther away from his home, and this was all he wanted to do. He managed to get into a carriage of a passing train, and the joy of travelling in a train was a new delight to his youthful mind. He would take as long a ride as he could while undetected. The train was a slow one, but traversed a long distance, and Himm went on and on till he reached a large station, where it came to a halt. All the passengers shouldered their bags and walked out, so Himm followed suit. Not knowing whither he was going, he kept behind the surging crowd which a large junction disgorges from time to time. The crowd scattered, but a few stragglers made a bee line for the serai hard by, to which Himm also directed his steps.

It was eight on the morning of an October day, calm, cool and brilliant. A touch of cold presaged the advent of winter, and galvanized the people into new life. Everybody was moving about with an alertness which, only a few days back, would have been impossible.

The serai was full to overflowing with travellers, who comprised all sorts and conditions of men. A great many of them, however, appeared to be pilgrims, bound for the celebrated shrine of

Baikunthpur. They had packed their kavars—a bamboo pole with slings at either end, resembling a pair of weighing scales. The slings held holy relics, and one of them contained a hollowed gourd vessel, filled with water of the holy Ganges. This water the devout carried on foot to long distances, from one end of the peninsula to the other. It was offered to the gods, who ever thirsted for the sacred fluid.

A concourse of pilgrims is an invariable attraction to the itinerant evangelist, who hopes to make converts of a people whose bigoted adhesion to their own faith has led them to inflict upon themselves untold privations, and whose belief in the cursedness of life has been responsible for the inglorious history of their country.

However, the missionary believes that his evangelization can only affect the religiously-minded. To this class belonged the Rev. J. McGeorge, who visited the usual haunts of pilgrims. Mr. McGeorge, though bearing an Irish name, was, as a matter of fact, an Indian, probably a low caste Indian, who had been locally ordained to hold the position of a Native pastor. He was an understudy to the Rev. Mr. Saunders, who was the local head of an American Mission.

McGeorge was accompanied by a catechist, for he never went out for bazaar preaching without a white missionary, whose presence was considered essential to attract an audience. The catechist commenced by playing on a portable harmonium. The three preachers opened their meeting by singing a hymn in chorus, and this sufficed to attract a motley crowd, to whom the white preacher addressed his short introductory sermon. Mr.

McGeorge was then introduced, and he was followed by the catechist, who closed the proceedings.

Himm was an impressionable youth. Having nothing to do, he stood awaiting some inspiration as to what he should do to procure a meal, for he was hungry. He was a poor boy, but too proud to beg. He listened to the missionary's discourse, and while it was proceeding, he questioned Pandit Shambho Nath, the catechist, whether the missionaries required a handy man. Shambho Nath eyed the lad from head to foot, and then asked him where the man was to whom he referred. The youngster replied, "I am the man."

The catechist eyed him suspiciously, and asked him where he came from, and where were his parents. Himm replied, truthfully, that he had no parents to speak of, and no village which he could call his own. Reclamation of the waifs and strays was one of the duties of missionaries, so the catechist asked him to follow him to the mission house.

Himm pleaded that he was ravenously hungry, and could not walk ; but that, after securing a meal, he would come to the Mission House towards evening, which he did. Himm was a fine-looking lad, and the missionary took kindly to him and admitted him to the orphanage. He was, however, a Hindu, and not a convert, for he was too young to be converted without his guardian's consent. Shambhu Nath was to arrange for his meal with the Hindu teacher, who happened to be an orthodox Brahmin.

Himm had to attend the orphanage school. As he got one square meal a day, and had not to fag for his tutor—nor were there any stray ponies or



donkeys to track—Himm had no diversion to distract his mind. Consequently he applied it to his studies, and was soon declared the prodigy of the school.

From school, he was promoted to the college, where his voracious learning soon attracted the attention of his professors. At the early age of sixteen, he took his degree, with conspicuous honours in two subjects. It was his passport to a state scholarship, awarded to the best student of the year, for post-graduate studies in Europe. There were six candidates, but the judges had no hesitation in recommending his selection.

Himm was entered as a state scholar in King's College, Cambridge—a college then famous for the teaching of classics and history. Himm was a born *littérateur*, so his academic studies did not call for an overdraft on his mind. He headed the class list of the year, and was called to the Bar. His liberal education being complete, he returned home, with a view to earning money. He had no difficulty in making a mark in his profession, and would have lived and died in discreet obscurity, if Fate had not willed otherwise.

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## CHAPTER II

### HIMM REVISITS NAGINA

HIMM had left Nagina some fifteen years. After that lapse of time, when he rose to affluence, he put into execution his long-restrained desire to revisit his birthplace and make his parents the sharers of his luck.

He went to Nagina, but found the place wholly blotted off the map. The railway line had run some miles off, and had to traverse the marshy catchment area of the great river Priyamvada. Now it had been diverted through Nagina, the land being gravel and more suitable for a railway track than for raising fodder.

The village had, consequently, disappeared, and with it the inhabitants. He inquired of every one who was likely to know if they could tell him anything about the recent less conspicuous residents, but no one knew anything. He thought he would inquire from the families who belonged to his own caste, as they must be interested in the varying fortunes of its poorer members.

Amongst these, the family of Kishore Singh had recently risen into prominence. Kishore had been, like himself, a poor man when he started life, but he had made money out of railway contracts. He was the father of a large family, of several sons and

daughters, all in their teens. Himm's name had not yet penetrated the wilds of Nagina, though it was ringing in all the larger cities. He met Kishore Singh, and cautiously questioned him if he knew such a man as Rup Singh of his own caste.

"Rup Singh! Yes, there was a tenant of that name, but he died long ago. There is no trace of him now."

Rup Singh was only forty when Himm ran away from home. If he had died "ages ago," he must have died very young. But he was assured that poor Rup had been hale and hearty, until he was carried off by the world-wave of influenza of 1918. His widow survived him only a few days, and fell a victim to the same scourge. Himm now realized that he was an orphan, and all alone in the world.

Though Kishore was an orthodox Rajput, he possessed the noble tradition of that kingly clan. He offered Himm his hospitality, detained him for several days, and made arrangements for his shikar, of which Himm had been a life-long devotee.

Himm had developed into a fine broad-shouldered young man, with a classical forehead, and those lovely black eyes which had made many an English girl sigh for his smile. Kishore had several marriageable daughters, ranging from seven to twelve. The eldest, Lilawati, had already been married, and was the mother of an infant of six months. Her younger sister, Phulkumari, aged ten, was a bright little kid, whom Kishore Singh had selected mentally for Himm.

He followed the usual practice applicable to all Hindu marriages. The father of the girl having spotted an eligible boy as a suitable match for his

daughter, the next thing to do is to secure the horoscopes of the two, and place them before the family priest-astrologer for examination of their affinity.

Kishore asked Himm if he had a horoscope, and the young man replied that his horoscope had been prepared by one Mani Ram Dube, but that he had no copy of it himself.

"Mani Ram Dube ! Why he is also our family priest."

"Where is he now ?" asked Himm. "He must know the details of my poor parents' death. I should like to see him."

"Why, certainly, certainly. I will fetch him now, for he lives only three hundred paces away. I have given him my own cowshed to live in."

Kishore was as good as his word. He brought Mani Ram with him, and the astrologer had a bundle of some kind tucked under his right arm. He wore a dull lackadaisical smile, which had become permanently imprinted on his face, which, with its serried furrows, gave it the appearance of a gargoyle.

Himm gave him time to unload his bundle, straighten out his arm, and squat on the matted floor. It was an intricate piece of gymnastics, which Dubeji alone could perform.

After he had taken a pinch or two of the snuff which he carried with him, in a match-box tucked into his dhoti (loin cloth), his spirits revived, and he asked Kishore if the gentleman sitting on the charpoy was Himm.

Kishore nodded assent, adding that he had earned great distinction and was an ornament of his clan. The Dubeji paid no attention to this gratuitous

eulogy, for his mind was wavering between his snuff and his opium.

"Dubeji, where is Himm's horoscope of which you said you had a copy?" asked Kishore.

"In that bundle."

"Then open it. I want to see it."

"That bundle cannot be opened till I have purified myself by taking a bath. I have become impure, as I had to cross the shadows of so many Mhchas (low caste Hindus)."

"Yes, yes! Then why don't you take a bath. Here's the well and the bucket and the rope."

"How can I take a bath till I see the grihas," protested the man. "The planetary universe controls human action."

"Meanwhile, take something to eat or drink," suggested Kishore. "Here are some hot jalibis and milk." The sight of that appetizing confectionery promptly overcame the Pundit's religious scruples. He did not wait either for his bath or purification, or for a favourable sign of the asteroids. He finished his dinner, took out a small rag bag from another fold of his dhoti, placed two shining globules of opium on the palm of his hand, admired their beauty and leaden lustre, and mentally exclaimed to himself, "Oh charmer of my life, what would life be without thee." He rolled them again and again, and then, with a sip of the milk of which a lota-ful was still remaining unconsumed, he gulped them down and gave a sonorous sigh of relief. He then spread out his feet, and called for the bundle. Unfolding a hand-made brown paper, about four inches by twelve, he declared it to be the horoscope of Himm's Rashi, which applied equally to all

persons with the same commencing letter to their name.

Delicacy guided Himm to another place.

"Dubeji, have you seen the boy?" asked Kishore.

"Yes. He is very good-looking and seems clever."

"What does his jantri (horoscope) say?"

"The horoscope I have is his Rashi horoscope. I must prepare one of his own, and I shall then be able to forecast his future."

"Then, Dubeji, make one carefully, and take into your counsel the Pandeji, who is an authority on horoscopes."

"That is not necessary. You can, however, employ Pandeji to prepare a horoscope of his own, and I can then compare them. It will make assurance doubly sure."

"Yes, that seems an excellent idea."

After some time, Himm returned, and took advantage of Kishore's absence to question the Dubeji about his parents. It was however pumping from a dry well, for the Dubeji's mind was a blank.

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## CHAPTER III

### SIEGE TO HIMM'S HEART

HIMM settled down in Osmanabad, where he built for himself a palatial house of his own design, which was the envy of the town. He was looking out for a wife, but had no idea that Kishore was in earnest about him. He was a shrewd parent, however, and took time by the forelock to capture Himm.

But he was a superstitious man, and implicitly believed in planetary influences, so to him the casting of horoscopes was more truthful than the evidence of his senses. Dube wanted the date and the hour of Himm's birth, which Kishore had already ascertained. The two Pundits prepared their respective horoscopes, which were, curiously enough, the replica of one another. They concurred in their forecasts. They gave it as their opinion that, during the seventy years of their lives (each was about sixty) they had never come across a life so favoured by happy events. Himm had been a great Rishi in his previous life, and had accumulated a huge store of virtue, which he had inherited. His voice would be more powerful than that of the King, his wealth would be untold, his reputation world-wide. He would enjoy unfailing longevity, extending to over four score and ten, would marry twice, and would be happy with his second wife. He would beget a numerous progeny, but would not find happiness in

his children. His planetary conjunctions agreed with those of Kishore Kumari. Their marriage was possible, and commendable to Kuver.

Kishore thought this a fine prediction. Himm came of good, though poor, stock. Kishore was anxious for this alliance for several reasons, the most urgent being Himm's fabled wealth.

Now the rule of the caste ordains that, after the horoscopes tally, the marriage is as good as made. If Himm had a father, or some one *in loco parentis*, he would have been consulted, and all questions regarding dowry would have been discussed with him. It was awkward to open negotiations with the bridegroom elect, and was never done. The shastras had, however, provided for such a contingency. Where the boy was an orphan, his priest took the place of his parents. Dubeji was, therefore, to be treated as Himm's father for the purpose of his marriage.

Himm had not set eyes upon his would-be spouse, for a Hindu marriage is a sacrament, a pre-ordained religious rite, in which the parties directly involved can exercise no volition. Moreover, since such marriages are contracted in the girl's infancy, she has no volition to exercise.

Dubeji was primed by Kishore to see Himm, and Pandeji accompanied him to represent Kishore. The two priests had decided to see his marriage through. They said to Himm :

"Himm sahib, you are now a great man, but your father was my client," began Dubeji. "He was a good man and, though dead, I still revere his memory. I offer one and a quarter lacs of bael leaves to the god Manadeo in his name every



Shravan ; while in Kuar I offer rice balls for the peaceful repose of his soul. It is my sacred duty, which I have not failed to discharge since his death."

"What Dubeji says is perfectly true. He loved his yajman (client) as he loved no other," put in Pandeji.

"I am grateful to you, Dubeji, for what you have done and are doing for my deceased father," replied Himm. Dubeji rebuked him sharply for thanking him for doing his bare duty. After some more formality the two priests fell to business.

"We have been, as we ought to be, anxious about your marriage," remarked Dubeji.

"Then we are both anxious about the same subject," Himm agreed.

"I have been casting my eye high and low, and have decided upon a match upon which the planets smile approvingly."

"It is so, for I too have cast a horoscope," added Pandeji. "Here it is. It coincides with Dubeji's Fortune Sheet."

"Who is the girl ?"

"The second daughter of Kishore. She is fair as a fairy, has learnt two Hindi books, can cook and sew, and is still learning. She is healthy."

"It is so," remarked Pandeji, "I have also seen the girl, and agree with Dubeji."

"But I am over twenty-five—how can I marry a girl of ten ? Moreover, I have never met her."

"Of course, if you wish to see her and make a sahibi marriage, I shall be able to give you a peep ; but it must be unawares. As for her age, the younger the better. It is safer !"

"I agree, and second Dubeji," put in Pandeji.

Himm thought that, though the disparity in age was an obstacle, it might be a case of Hobson's choice. He must first see the girl. It was arranged that Himm was to pass along the footpath running along the bank of the village tank, the moment a signal was given. The village girls went to take their bath in the lake, and Kishore Kumari was amongst them.

Himm had as slight a view of her as one might get of a Derby racer, seen while running a full course. But whatever he may not have been able to see, he had seen enough to be able to swear that the girl's face was pitted and dark. Himm could on no account marry her !

Dubeji offered him the bait of a large dowry, but Himm was not going to marry money. Moreover, money had never affected his judgment.

The two pandits were sorely disappointed. They promised to keep their weather eyes open and advise Himm of other possibilities. They brought other khabar (news) of more or less the same kind.

Himm was now convinced that, if he wished to marry in the caste, he would have to be content with a child wife whom he must bring up and educate. She might turn out to be a paragon of a wife, or she might be a failure, in which case his religion and his caste permitted other marriages, though there was no assurance that they would turn out any better. He was clearly realizing what a grim lottery marriage was !

One fine morning, as he lay stretched in his easy-chair receiving clients and visitors, his clerk announced the presence of a Mr. Pantaloo, who had

come to consult him on business. He was the court agent of an excise contractor, who had fallen foul of his employer about some accounts.

By the affability of his talk and the geniality of his manners, he had ingratiated himself into the confidence of Himm, in whose private life he showed himself interested. He informed him that he knew of a pretty girl who would do well as his consort. She was of mixed parentage, but otherwise she possessed both good looks and education. She was twenty-one. He showed Himm her photograph, which produced a favourable impression, so a meeting was arranged.

The girl was affable, and Pantaloo went bail for her character. A marriage was arranged, and as Himm was in search of a wife, he thanked Providence and Pantaloo that one had been sent to him without any effort. He went with her through the ceremony of marriage, and Pantaloo congratulated both Himm and Rita upon their marriage.

Rita held a marriage feast, at which her match-maker was deservedly assigned the place of honour. It was Himm's first essay in matrimony, and it was not long before he realized that those who marry in haste have often to repent at leisure.

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## CHAPTER IV

### MARRIAGE AND AFTERWARDS

ON the first day after the marriage, Himm discovered the folly of his ways. In his youthful ignorance he had failed to inquire into the antecedents of his inamorata. He had taken for granted that women turn out in fact, as imagination paints them in fiction. He had come into contact with Rita by a mere chance, and she was now to mould his destiny.

On the day after the marriage, Himm's literary friends came in shoals to congratulate him, and condole with him in jest. The one was the jest, the other a reality, as he had already discovered. He received their compliments with a dubious grin—a grin which his friends mistook for becoming humility. They drank to the health of the new benedict and spent the evening in boisterous hilarity.

Himm was, however, pondering over the folly which he had so rashly committed. He had graduated with distinction at Cambridge. His prize poems had already attracted to him a small coterie of friends, including a lady who had been bracketed with him in the greats. This lady was the only daughter among the numerous members of a family who had won their spurs on the river or on

the field of sport, while all of them had graduated with distinction.

Himm was greatly attached to Beatrice, and she to him, but he held strong views on the alliances of East and West. He had known of the social ostracism to which western women marrying orientals were subjected, and he remembered the disparity in the mode of living, and between the customs and manners of the two people.

But the one important question which influenced his judgment was his intense patriotism, for youthful patriotism is always intense. Himm said to himself that if he married an Englishwoman, he destroyed the chance of some Indian woman to marry him, and India was not yet prepared for matrimonial internationalism. He had, therefore, to dismiss from his thoughts the vision of the glorious Beatrice, who, on her part, discussed the question equally frankly with him. While she disagreed with his views, she refused to combat his conclusion, and as the interview was about to close, Beatrice could control her feelings no longer.

She sobbed, and burst into an hysterical outcry, throwing her tresses upon Himm's body, and vowing that if Himm did not marry her, no one else should.

For some months after Himm's marriage, the girl used to write to her former lover, but Rita would either steal her letters, or steam them open for reading, after which they were reposted to Himm.

On every mail day Himm had to prepare himself for a battle royal with Rita, who swore at Beatrice, giving her a character which more correctly described her own.

Himm mentioned his family troubles in one of

his letters, whereupon Beatrice wrote a pathetic parting letter, justifying Rita.

Beatrice is now dead—poor soul, she took the veil ; worked for the waifs and strays, nursing them as her own children. She contracted consumption, to which she succumbed early in life. Himm composed a touching *In Memoriam* sonnet to her memory—all he could do. But though Beatrice was dead, her soul could not perish, and in its next incarnation, it may yet alter the course of Himm's life.

## CHAPTER V

### RITA BEFORE HER MARRIAGE

RITA had been a precocious child, and even before her marriage she had obtained a certain notoriety. She had toyed with her admirers before her marriage, and they continued to haunt her dreams. So far as Himm was concerned, he had soon reason to realize the necessity of repentance. He was a sentimentalist, and sentimental considerations had moved him to commit that rashness.

Between Rita and Himm there was nothing in common—Himm was intellectual, while Rita's intelligence was low. The man was fond of study, the woman was fond of social gaieties. Himm's occupation was mainly intellectual ; Rita's mainly frivolous. He was refined ; she was vulgar. There was only one thing in common between them, for both possessed a short temper. But Himm's outbursts were short-lived, while Rita's were enduring, and Himm hated quarrelling as much as Rita loved it.

Himm was far too high-souled to complain, but his soul was getting cramped under the crushing weight of Rita's fatuous vulgarity.

Rita was the daughter of a petty trader, and had an exaggerated notion of the jurisdiction of officials. She harboured a grudge against her husband for not attending to her wardrobe.

One evening, while Himm was having a smoke with the local magistrate in the garden, Rita appeared in tattered garments, and when questioned by the friend about her *déshabillé*, she burst into a long tirade against Himm's niggardliness, at which the magistrate was staggered. A young wife, of a few months' standing, appearing in semi-nudity before a stranger, was a scene for the gods.

Himm began to revise his idea of women, which he had received from sentimental books.

On another occasion, when Himm was a candidate for an office, Rita sent a long letter to the magistrate, denouncing Himm and holding him up to ridicule as a person who did not link even a single virtue with his thousand crimes.

The appearance of any woman was a red rag to Rita's jealousy, and she would not stop at half measures. Endowed by nature and training with no delicacy, she would carry war into the enemy's household, denouncing her before all her relations, male and female, in a place where the public could see and hear.

Rita delighted in husband-baiting, and her own past made her suspicious of Himm. She was a born fighter, with a stentorian voice, the looks of a satyr, and a vocabulary so choice and voluble that it would have made old Thersites turn in his grave.

Rita was acknowledged to be a champion fighter, and when she had no one else to fight with, she exercised her talent by fighting with her husband.

Himm was a man of peace, who, from early life, had been taught to measure his words. He said that he was paid highly for fighting, and he did not see why he should fight for nothing.



But Rita gave him no peace—whether it was because the neighbour's dog had carried off two of her chickens, the cook had absented himself without notice, or because the laundry woman had not returned the clothes on the appointed day, it was sufficient to furnish a *casus belli*, and she would fight Himm when he was seated surrounded by clients, or in the midst of friends. She regarded onlookers as giving her special advantages, and when Himm begged her not to disgrace herself in public, she exclaimed: "What is the good of my complaining in private—who listens? I want every one to hear and put you to shame."

Rita had, from the start, decided to marshal public opinion against her husband, and however trivial the occasion, she would wait for her attack till Himm had some visitors in sight.

Himm tried all possible means of conciliation, flattery, cajolery, menaces and threats, but they were of no avail against the oratory of the Amazon. Himm discovered early that he could obtain no respite from this perpetual fusillade except in flight, so he found means to assign himself separate quarters, which he used sparingly.

This was a fresh challenge to her supremacy in the house, and poor Himm had to cultivate an out-station practice, in order to escape, as far as possible, from the fire of the restless virago.

Rita was a determined woman. Once she swallowed a large quantity of opium, in the hope of being able to accuse Himm of poisoning her.

Himm had not bargained for such amenities of married life, for his idea of marriage had been one of comradeship. He hated these daily scenes, and

avoided conflict as far as possible ; but he found that it was the daily exercise which Rita needed for her lungs. Even if Rita had possessed the most amiable disposition and the sweetest of temper, it would not have suited Himm, for his ideals were different. There would still have been that temperamental incompatibility of temper, which the American courts rightly treat as a sufficient ground for divorce.

Himm was by nature a dreamer, a recluse. His early life had made deep gashes in his heart, which had been healed, but they had left deep scars of the chilling reality of the movements of human life which he could not understand.

Between his own life and that of Rita, there had been a wide span, which brought to his mind the vivid consciousness of contrasts. Her sombre figure, with its fixed mood of petulant spleen, ever brooding over his indifference, widened the gulf which had separated their lives.

Himm had forfeited both his privacy and his peace with his marriage. He could not talk to himself, without being heard ; he could not move without being seen ; he could not act without being watched. His marriage had brought to his side an ever-wakeful partner, who had given him cause for distrust.

Himm was a romanticist, Rita a realist. He had idealized life into the dreamland of his imagination, while she had no imagination to realize anything at all. Her idea of marriage was indulgence in sensuality, while Himm wanted a collaborator and a colleague in his study. She wanted to live a pleasant life and leave him alone in his intellectual phantasies.

He had at one time believed that, given a man and a woman with a desire to be happy, they could be happy. He had seen the friendships of cats and dogs, but Rita proved that though cats and dogs might agree, men and women did not.

Himm was a Hindu by birth, but became early a cosmopolitan by conviction. He had read history, and had drawn a moral from his reading of it—that a nation, like an individual, has its span of life—that, as such, Hindu and Islamic civilizations in the country were both dead. They had done their allotted work—and perished! Their resurrection was an idle dream, and there was only hope for the land—hope that would arise with a new nation.

That nation might be formed out of the debris of the old, but it must receive its vital vigour from the sturdier stock of the West. As the rose bush, after it has put forth its blossoms, requires to be pruned, its limbs maimed and joined on to more vigorous grafts, so a nation that has lived its day required a radical reconstruction in order to revive its energy or improve its strength.

A new effort is only possible for a new nation. The Indian races would never rise to be a nation unless they were welded into a homogeneous whole by religious and social fusion. Himm was the apostle of his own creed, and had married Rita, who was the product of a Hindu-Moslem union, sanctified by the waters of Jerusalem.

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## CHAPTER VI

### HIMM AND HIS NEIGHBOURS

HIMM's cup of connubial misery was filled to overflowing by his two neighbours, the Rams and the Kachas.

The Rams hailed from Northern India, and were representatives of a vigorous race which had poured down the Indus valley in the early influx of the Aryan settlers. They were a family of four, Santosh, the father, being a man of means, enjoying life as a gentleman farmer. His son, Rudra Prakash, had been brought up in Europe, and though he had failed to take a degree, he had returned home with his mind well stored with the ways and conditions of western life.

Like himself, his wife was a Hindu, educated, refined and polished, possessing that most essential of all qualities which enthral men—feminine charm. Her maiden sister lived with her for company. She had passed out of one of the local colleges, taking a good degree, and was now without any clear idea as to her future plans.

The Kachas were their neighbours, and hailed from Guzerat, where Mrs. Kacha, who was of German extraction, had met and married her husband. She, too, had a maiden sister, who had become naturalized in England with her parents,

and had adopted the language of that country as her vehicle for thought. Mrs. Kacha's mother, an old lady of seventy, lived with them. Kacha was a canal engineer, and his work took him frequently away from home.

The three families would have made an excellent combine, if they had not got into sixes and sevens, owing to Rita's genius for setting persons by the ears.

India is a large continent ; its population is not homogeneous. Divided as it is by innumerable castes and creeds, communal and linguistic barriers, social intercourse between them follows the line of communal affinity.

Even European servants and settlers observe the same rule. They do not associate with Indians, while Indians, as a rule, do not associate with them. Among themselves, the association of officials depends upon their official standing, while non-officials, who are mainly lawyers, join one or other of the official cliques.

The habit of life of the educated Indian is partially based upon the European model. Those who follow it live in a suburban settlement where the Europeans mostly dwell. Of late an effort has been in evidence, on both sides, to bridge the social gulf which divides the European from the Indian, but it has not been successful.

Many Indians who visit Europe import European help-mates upon their return. The European looks askance at such *mesalliances*, and punishes the offenders by a social ban. As the European wife can seldom adapt herself to oriental ways, her life is at times one of isolation and seclusion, from which

the only relief is her flight to the hills or to her homeland.

Of all Europeans in India, the Englishman belongs to the dominant race, and his insularity is proverbial. The continental nations possess a wider outlook, and their assimilation with other nations does not offer the same impediments.

Indian qualities also count, and it so happened that Mrs. Kacha, who had been brought up under the fostering care of the old dame, had completely identified herself with her husband. Between them there was the most perfect intellectual sympathy, for while Mr. Kacha went on applying his tape to the earthworks thrown up by the canal, Mrs. Kacha would sit in his car and fix her admiring gaze upon her husband as he hurried to and fro, from morn to noon, in the afternoon and in the evening, long hours after sunset. The two were inseparable, and what pleased him interested her, while she confessed that even if she wanted to do so, she could not stay at home.

If marriage has a meaning, it is only when it is adorned by love—otherwise it is a delusion and a snare, and a very serious one at that—far more serious than a death sentence, since it kills the soul. Such was poor Rudra's fate, such was Himm's. Rudra's wife was the antithesis of Rita—soft, gentle, but implacably jealous.

As one common vice makes the whole world akin, Gulanar became a bosom friend of Rita, and the two women instinctively joined hands in keeping their hubbies under control. They used to exchange views, and adopt a common plan of campaign to vindicate their wifely status. They

agreed that all husbands were to be distrusted so far as women were concerned ; and that the only way to manage them was to spy on them and bribe the orderlies to report their doings.

These menials being paid by piecework, had no difficulty in inventing scandal when there was none in fact. For instance, when Rudra's peon, Ramadhar, found his tip missing, for want of racy news which Rita expected for the money, he invented a fine fable that he had seen Himm kissing Gulanar's sister, who was affectionately known as the " Beti " (or the daughter) in the family.

Now Beti and Himm were friends, and as such they exchanged jokes, without which life would be a dreary drudgery. This Rita had watched, but Gulanar knew her sister too well to take her conduct amiss.

Rita, however, knew that Beti was pretty—and who would not kiss a pretty girl if he could get a chance ! Rita dare not mention it to Gulanar, but she had to take action. Assuming one of her confidential moods, she passed it on to Gulanar that she had heard rumours about Rudra meeting Stella in the botanical gardens.

Gulanar's temper was on fire. She was a woman with a will, and like most Indian ladies, superjealous of mixed company. Her idea of an ideal husband was that he should keep to his work and his wife, and leave society to take care of itself.

Rudra and Kacha happened to be school friends, and they regarded their respective families as one. Himm, though a few years senior, was privileged to be admitted to this confederacy. But jealousy and distrust had sown the poison.

Stella was musical and set Himm's poems to music ; Beti's ear was musical and she felt lonely without Stella. The two girls were, therefore, drawn together, and in a short time made themselves inseparable, while the old mother, Mrs. Heikle, who was an accomplished chatelain, inducted Beti to the mysteries and the accomplishments of the European housewife.

Beti tried her prentice hands at embroidering slippers, from a design for which the yarn in her possession was suited. It was the well-known design of Cupid.

The slippers were made—but what was she to do with them ? Mrs. Heikle suggested that they might be given to Himm, as a birthday present, and Beti thought it an excellent idea.

Himm was a man of multifarious attainments. He was the beau-ideal of women—clever, good-looking, strong, active, and an inimitable raconteur ; he was the cynosure of the drawing-room.

Beti was young, and had to love somebody ; who was more worthy of her love than Himm ? That Himm was married did not prevent her from admiring him, and both Himm and Beti began to experience a new pleasurable sensation in each other's company.

But it was platonic love, an affection the main-spring of which lay embedded in the soul, and which transcended its earthly limits and conception.

Stella felt a similar call towards Rudra. She was a young romantic soul, and in the spring of her fancy, she turned naturally to thoughts of love.

The whole of Khichdipur was soon astir and began to pass, in low whispers, the usual exag-



gerated version of the carryings on of Stella and Beti.

Rita and Gulanar were frantic. They had no conception of two high-souled persons admiring and loving each other because of their mental affinity and kindred sympathies. Their eyes could not see, nor their minds conceive, the inexpressible pleasure which pure love brings to the lovers. Profane love, said Himm, is of the brute ; pure love is of the gods. Every man and woman must feel the force of love, at one time or another in their lives—not the love which is a feeble passion, but a love which is dominant, all-consuming, all-devouring, an over-mastering passion for the company and society of another. Such love may grow between persons of the same sex, but it thrives best between opposites, because woman is the flower that makes the garland of life. To man, woman ; to woman, man ; they are indispensable, but it is love that adds the music and fragrance to their lives, and that love remains embedded in the heart till it is awakened into life by the vibration of a responsive chord, which makes the music and completes the harmony of life.

This fact Mrs. Heikle knew, as much as Stella or Beti, Rudra or Himm. For when a deputation of the wives waited upon her, ostensibly for advice, but in reality for the redress of their grievance, the old dame put off her goggles, laid aside her Bible, and asked the deputation what was wrong if young people enjoyed themselves.

“Wrong?” exclaimed Rita. “It is immoral.” To which Gulanar gave her hesitating nod. It was clear to the married women that their husbands had gone on the spree, and that Mrs. Heikle was abetting them.

In her attack and defence, Rita was less scrupulous than Gulanar, though both were equally determined. Rita suggested to Gulanar that the matter should be referred to the two offenders themselves, and if they received no redress, they should create a scene—in the efficacy of which women are firm believers.

The crisis was reached when an "At Home" was in progress. It was one of those "At Homes" when departing friends meet new arrivals, and when new friends are welcomed and farewells spoken to old ones.

Mr. Lal Bahadur, who had loyally served the Government in tracking bandits and other malefactors, was retiring from service. He was a man who had come to Khichdipur in his early teens, and was not a grey-beard on the eve of retirement.

A large party of his friends and admirers assembled in Himm's drawing-room to do him honour. A musical concert had been arranged, and tea was being passed round when Rita sent her maid to demand that the chair on which Beti was sitting should be vacated for another purpose.

Beti understood the insult, but Himm made light of it by suggesting that the chair had lost its leg. The company were acquainted with the rumours which had been circulated, and understood its meaning. They also knew Rita ! It had been arranged that Stella was to be unseated simultaneously by Gulanar, but she lost courage, and did not act her part.

The meeting dispersed, and Himm, who was a fiend when roused, went for Rita ; but this provided just what Rita loved—a street scene. She rushed into the open in semi-nudity, shrieking and

shouting that she was being killed for the sake of a woman, and that she would make a court case of it. She lost no time in penning a series of scurrilous letters, charging her husband with a vile crime, and calling for the hand of vengeance to descend upon him.

Rita had made Khichdipur too hot for Himm, who packed up his belongings and shifted to Kamalpur. But what good does it do to a person to shift from one plague spot to another, when he carries the germs in his bedding? Himm did not realise this at first, but the scandal which had been hatched at Khichdipur dogged him to Kamalpur. Every eye turned against him as one who had been driven out of the decent society of Khichdipur.

Rudra was still there. He was a Hindu, though he had married Gulanar, who was not of his caste. He had retained his birthright of polygamy, which is at times a more humane form of divorce, in that it ensures the wife a life-long protection and maintenance. It is abhorrent to women; but many women are cast adrift after the decree absolute.

Beti was now twenty. She had graduated from an English seminary, where she had been brought up with European, Parsi, and Hindu girls, who were thirsting for knowledge and were besieging the gates of every institution which catered for the higher education of women. She had acquitted herself well in all the literary tests, but over and beyond these tests she had imbibed the new spirit of advance. She was a gifted musician, a star dancer, and had learnt such drawing and painting as the Indian schools taught. Her favourite author was Byron, next to whom she placed Tennyson, whom she could

recite by heart. In her plain, elegant sari, she sat down to compile verses, which she recited to Himm, who had won prizes for poetry at Cambridge.

But though Beti's liberal education was complete, she had received no professional training, and her married sister commenced to discuss in whispers Beti's future. The mother was a scion of an ancient family, and was rooted to her caste. Her ideas of marriage and its obligations were antediluvian.

Educated suitors, holding good positions, appeared to seek Beti's hand, and the girl selected one—a young engineer, whose employment in the Imperial grade gave him an assurance of a comfortable living wage, and the prospect of steady promotion.

But he was not of the caste and was accounted a Shudra in the social hegemony.

The question with Beti was whom to marry—the question with the mother was whom to marry in the caste. The caste to which Beti was assigned was an agricultural one, and all its adherents were knights of the plough. They had despised the attractions of a quill pen.

The mother consulted the father, and the two agreed that it was unthinkable for them to face the social ostracism which would follow Beti's marriage out of caste. They were for marrying her off to Sukhdeo Malguzar, an opulent owner of a hundred ploughs and twelve score of short-heads. He owned three villages, and had a manor which yielded an annual income of twenty thousand rupees. He was of Beti's caste, which was the main thing to consider.

The decision was no sooner made than Beti's fate

was sealed. She was naturally shy before her parents, but she confided to Mrs. Heikle her own predilection in the matter which primarily concerned her future happiness. She was for marrying someone between whom and herself there would be affinity.

Himm and Rudra had become brothers in misfortune. They could not understand the psychology of their womenfolk. Rudra was feeling lonely without Himm, who felt himself an exile in Kamalpur.

Rudra invited him to Khichdipur for a week-end, and Himm was glad of a change. But since Himm's departure, Gulanar had been casting about for a chance to settle Beti. She told her mother that it was not right that a grown-up girl should remain idle without occupation. Her parents, who belonged to the old school, had always looked askance at Beti's education, which they inwardly suspected had impaired her womanly virtues.

But Beti could not bear to be yoked to a golden calf. If she must marry, which she was none too anxious to do in a hurry, she would only marry the man she could love and admire. She was willing to go out into the world, and earn a living, and had received the offer of a lucrative post, which she was on the point of accepting.

But Gulanar stood in her way. She demurred to a young girl going out in the world, single and unprotected. Rudra did not know his own mind, and decided that he would consult Himm. But his friend preferred to trust to the maturer experience of Mrs. Heikle, and she became their general referee in matrimonial matters.

They laid Beti's case before her ; she gave no direct verdict, but it was plain what she thought of the proposal, for its mention let loose the flood-gates of her eloquence.

"Girls," said the old dame, "are of two types—firm and fickle. Of these, the fickle are the rule and firm an occasional exception."

It was curious, she remarked, how feminine nature was the same all over the world. She had found it so in Mid-Europe, as she did in the cannibal isles. Men were sometimes broken-hearted, and rightly so, because they considered themselves jilted by their girl; but a man should know that it is a doubtful assumption to make, when he claims any girl to be his—the truth being that no girl is his till she is dead. Girls like to flirt, and so do men. Flirtation arouses hopes, creates expectations, which, if premature, are foredoomed to failure.

A girl may really fall in love with a man, yet never marry him. It may be that she cannot—not that she won't.

"I have known women marry men whom they did not love; because they were attracted by their position, wealth, or other adventitious advantage. Their heart was pledged to another, and how many death-bed tragedies have I not seen. My own is a case in point. I was in love with a man whom I admired and adored. But I could not marry him for the simple reason that he was already married. I married, too. But both of us remained life-long lovers. He died only the other day—an old man of eighty, but the picture he clasped when he died was mine, and it was the picture which soothed him in his death. His death has broken

my own melody—I feel alone now as I never felt before. And such, my child, is life.”

The old dame could speak no more; she closed her eyes and sobbed. She could not sleep, for her mind had flung her memory back to years long gone. She passed in review the events of her youth, her assignations, her meetings, her love idylls in the woods, pleasant, delightful. How delicious was the memory, rendered far more so by the lapse of years, for Time had cast a golden glamour over the events which, sufficiently romantic though they were when they occurred, became mellowed and sweetened by age till they clung like a rosary of love round her memory.

But life would be drab and dull without its day dreams, for life's real pleasures are at best poor. But when they pass through the realms of fancy, they become ennobled and magnified, chastened and heightened into bliss.

Old Mrs. Heikle was a dreamer and she taught her disciples to dream. One such disciple was her own daughter Stella, while another, apt though of a lesser degree, was Beti. Their love romances began to be woven round their young lives by the fine imagery of Mrs. Heikle, who taught them the value of love. She warned them against the seductions of society—its hypocrisy, its hollowness, its debasement and debauchery.

Gulanar had listened with ill disguised incredulity to Mrs. Heikle's lay sermon on marriage. She was a plain, clear-thinking woman, and the clarity of her thoughts was controlled by her old mother, who had already taken a decision that Beti must be married, so as to give colour to no further

scandals. Dhani Ram was of her caste; he was well-to-do, and to him she assigned Beti for his wife.

The decision was cruel to Beti, but she had no alternative. She had been brought up in a system where the mother's word was law, so she bowed to the inevitable. Her marriage was solemnized, and Beti passed out of her family to join that of Dhani.

Stella was now left alone. Kamalpur was only a three-hour run from Khichdipur, and Beti's marriage had appeased Rita. She had, at any rate, moved her out of her husband's way. She made friends with Stella.

Rita yearned to visit Europe, but who would take her? "Why, we will," said Stella, "if you wish to come."

"Will you?" queried Rita, doubtfully.

"Indeed, we will," was the firm reply.

Stella had met a Spanish count, who had made his pile from Brazilian rubber and was then doing the world. He happened to be idling in the lounge when Stella passed, and his eyes met hers.

Stella felt a curious feeling the moment she set her eyes upon the Count. There were dozens of young men—smoking, drinking, chattering and sprawling in the lounge. She had frequently passed them all, but had never felt the queer sensation she did that day. The Count was a foreigner. He was not of her caste, and for that matter, he might have been married. But she did not care. Her æsthetic sense had awakened within her, and given her exquisite delight. She loitered in the lounge, and casually sauntered up to the hall porter to enquire if there were any letters for her. The Count followed and addressed a similar enquiry. The



porter cast his eyes over the pigeon holes, and shook his head to each enquirer.

"I wonder what becomes of my letters," Stella demanded. "Does no one write to me while I am here?"

"I seem to suffer a similar fate—no one cares to write to me either," replied the Count, smiling.

The ice being thus broken, the two fell into conversation. Stella told him that she was fond of painting and music, of which the Count professed to be a devotee. He told her long yarns about music and painting, and Stella vowed that if she had any money she would go to Florence and Munich. The Count said that his inclinations ran in the same directions, while as for money, a rich uncle had relieved him from that anxiety.

Love at first sight is not a fiction—it is, at times, a terrible reality. Such was the case of Stella, who passed a sleepless night, thinking of the Count, while her maiden modesty precluded any disclosure of her malady.

The Count invited her to a world tour, which she refused. He left the next day and failed to say good-bye to Stella, who had been unexpectedly called away to a Bazaar, at which she had promised to help. If the Count had known this, he would have plundered the stall and spared her much exertion.

Stella thought the Count only a gay Lothario, who made love at every port. He had given way to a momentary fancy for her, but as soon as she was out of sight, she must have gone out of mind.

Two days passed, when Stella again loitered in the porter's neighbourhood. She did not expect

any letters, though she was awaiting a catalogue from a drapery stores. The porter passed her a letter, but no catalogue. It was Stella's habit, as it is of most recipients of letters, to guess, without opening the letter, as to whom it was from and what were its contents.

The address was penned in a foreign hand, but the postmark gave no clue of its origin—from whom could it be, she wondered, as she tore it open, when to her surprise she read the following message :

ST. CLAIR,  
MISSINABAD,  
*5th August.*

DEAR MISS STELLA,

If you feel surprised to receive this letter recall to mind the fact that you suggested to me an excellent plan for keeping up correspondence, by writing to myself. I trust you will not mind if that self is for the moment another, and I have, therefore, presumed. I am anxious to revive the memory of our meeting at the Grand, and hope you will drop me a line to say how you are getting on, and whether you have come to any decision on the matter I suggested.

Yours sincerely,  
BERNHARD D'ABREAU.

Stella was pleased to receive a letter, and her first thoughts were that there was at least one person in the wide world to remember her. She had no idea of the pleasure it gave one to receive a purely social letter—from one of the opposite sex. Such is Nature's law. Stella did not know the Count;

he was an amiable stranger to her. Nevertheless, it was something to be thought of by someone out of sight.

She couched her reply in conventional platitudes. She hoped he was enjoying himself, and had met other charmers to while away his dull moments. The hotel was getting empty, the people were leaving for the plains.

The Count replied in a subdued though gushing tone—he had already found his charmer. There was no charmer to equal her, and he was longing to sit by her side listening to Wagner. He again reminded her of his suggestion.

After several months passed in correspondence, which grew in mutual endearments, Stella was constrained to accept the hospitable offer of the Count, and as she wanted to make up a party, she had, in a moment of thoughtless elation, invited Rita to join her in her tour.

Rita was glad to get away from Himm, and it must be confessed that Himm was equally glad to give her a change. When he heard of her proposal, he felt hurt that his wife should leave him as another person's companion. He was a man of means and provided for her equipment for the voyage, from which Rita was destined never to return.

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## CHAPTER VII

### STELLA'S WORLD VOYAGE

THE Count had agreed to meet the two ladies at Tomway, whence they set sail in the floating palace, *Koh-i-noor*. This steamer had just been provisioned for her maiden voyage to Australia, and on her return journey, she was picking up Indian passengers. Stella, Rita and the Count were among them.

The steamer weighed anchor according to the state of the tides. As it happened, there was not enough water in the harbour to start her before sunset, when she steamed out of the harbour, westward-bound, to the Mediterranean ports, Venice among them.

Stella had long wished to see this far-famed Queen of the Sea. She had read about her chequered history, her baths, and a thousand and one things which fired her imagination concerning the city of the Doges.

The starboard being breezy, everybody was crowding that portion of the promenade deck, where Stella and the Count greeted each other with unfeigned cordiality. Rita bowed distantly to the Count.

As usual, they discussed the other passengers, who numbered over five hundred and represented

almost every race on earth. Voyagers are notoriously free from conventions ; they have to remain imprisoned in their boat for three weeks or so, and friendships are easily made, and on landing usually forgotten. Anybody who is somebody is instantly spotted, and allotted places of honour beside the skipper; while anybody who is nobody is instantly relegated to the limbo of a long table filled with friendless nondescripts.

Curiously enough, the Count was relegated to this table, which Stella considered a slight. She knew that foreign titles were at a discount in England and that the Count, who belonged to one of the Latin races, was not a *persona grata* with representatives of the sturdier races of the North.

Rita was allotted an accidental partner in the person of Mr. Tomlins, an Anglo-Indian gentleman stated to be interested in tea. He was a tall, thick-set six-footer, and might have won his spurs as a pugilist. He said that he was going "home" to purchase machinery for his factory. His dress was that of a Bond Street mannequin, which singled him out as a man who could not be admitted into the best circles.

He was, however, quite happy with Rita, who needed a companion stronger than herself in build and character. Tomlins was a lion-tamer, for, within a few hours of their acquaintance, Rita lay prostrate at his feet. She forgot her Amazonian ways which had made her a terror to Himm. If she blustered, he gave her a stern look, and it stopped her speech. Even her jealousy of Stella disappeared, for when she hinted that Stella was the prime favourite of the Count, he remarked that

every Jack must have his Jill, and that there was nothing wrong in a man loving a woman—" *Honi soi qui mal y pense.*"

Stella began to see less and less of Rita, as Rita began to see more and more of Mr. Tomlins. In the numerous decks of the *Koh-i-noor*, there was such variety of company that, except for the élite of the boat, the rest mixed promiscuously, and seldom saw the same people for long or to talk to every day.

Rita, however, found time to go the round of the boat ; she had a tiff or a quarrel with a few, collected an assortment of spicy scandal from others, which was equally Mr. Tomlin's forte.

But while Rita had a lively memory which, at times, got mixed up, Tomlins was possessed of a vivid imagination, which he exercised when there was any scarcity of news.

In the evening, when Tomlins would sit on the deck, sipping his fourth or fifth peg, and Rita her second, they would retail the gossip of the day, get hopelessly mixed up on the facts, have a mock quarrel, in which Tomlins made a spirited attack, silencing Rita's batteries. She would then take to crying, which invariably ended by Tomlin planting on her a brotherly kiss. Tomlins and Rita had now become thus related !

In her daily rounds, Rita made one great discovery. She learnt that Count D'Abreau was no count at all, but an Argentine pork-butcher, who had made money as a meat-packer in the War, and was now conducting his grand tour through the Eastern Hemisphere. She told Tomlins this in confidence, but he thought it far too important to

keep to himself. So he took the earliest opportunity of formulating a hint which passed on to Stella.

Mr. Tomlins' relations with Stella were friendly—in fact so growingly friendly that it had already awakened the demon of jealousy in Rita, who showed it by her looks. But Tomlins suppressed the outburst by his soul-force.

Rita had begun to fear him, and when Stella told the Count of it, he expressed no surprise, but added that when he could train the most ferocious and the most treacherous of animals to be submissive to his will, it was not difficult to break in a woman. It was a question of the necessary tact and force.

Tomlins had both, but of a rough and ready kind ; still it sufficed to tame a person of a rough and ready nature. Such was Rita, and so was Stella, though in a less degree.

The Count was shrewd enough to see it, and he was already getting jealous of Stella's attention to Tomlins, whose mental attitude towards the two ladies was that he would be equally happy with either—were the other dear charmer away.

But since it was not so, he was trying to drive a coach and pair, with marked success !

Rita and Stella were both bound for the same shore ; but two days before the *Koh-i-noor* was to touch Venice, Rita began to feel that she must somehow get Tomlins away from Stella, and as there was no other means of doing so, except by imprisoning him on board, she suggested to him a longer cruise round the Bay.

Tomlins was somewhat surprised at the suggestion, since Rita had been complaining constantly

of *mal de mer*, and requisitioning Tomlins' services to relieve her tedium.

He pointed out that the Bay was notoriously boisterous, and that a longer sea route would disturb his plans, but Rita reasoned him out of his indecision. Tomlins would, however, sound Stella. His mind was roving between Stella and Rita. Stella was a pretty girl—sparklingly witty, captivating, and charming in her manners; but she showed a decisive preference for the Count! Rita, on the other hand, would have gladly courted the Count in order to spite Stella, but she found Tomlins a godsend whom she wished to keep.

Rita was not so attractive as Stella; but she could make herself up into a bewitching fairy when she thought the occasion worth the trouble—otherwise she was untidy in her dress, and none too æsthetic in her general get-up.

But on the day she boarded the *Koh-i-noor*, she had taken pains to improve the occasion by loading herself with the pearls and diamonds which Himm's artistic eye had collected. She was dressed in a sari of cloth of gold, whose lustre and change of colour at each turn reminded the onlookers of the presence of a *Pari* or a *nautch* girl.

When, in the disposal of unclaimed passengers, Tomlins first found himself seated beside Rita, he eyed her jewellery with envy more than her looks.

When the boat dropped anchor in the Venetian roadstead, Rita said good-bye to Stella; Stella to Mr. Tomlins, and Mr. Tomlins to the Count; and then, after lightening her burden by a couple of hundred tourists, the overcrowded boat deflected



her course towards Naples, Marseilles and Liverpool.

From Venice, Stella wrote a glowing account of her voyage to her mother, in which she casually mentioned Rita's seasickness, the kindness of her cavalier Tomlins, and her decision to round the Bay.

Though Himm had no news from Rita—in fact, they had never written to each other from the night of their marriage—Mrs. Heikle assured him that Rita was enjoying the sea trip.

Meanwhile, Rita landed in Liverpool, and having no object in view other than touring and sight-seeing, she readily accepted Mr. Tomlins' offer to cicerone her.

Tomlins had been sent home on a short leave to select machinery, and his furlough was coming to an end. One evening, he broke the news to Rita, and the woman was naturally disconcerted. How could he suddenly leave her alone, amongst an alien people, and in a foreign land?

Tomlins saw the force of her objection; he knew of a friend who would gladly take his place and discharge his duties towards her. This was a Mr. Desouza, whom Tomlins had met in a public-house.

Mr. Desouza took charge of Rita, spent her money, and showed her such sights as took her fancy. She was fond of the music halls, and this involved no exertion to Desouza, who was himself fond of amusement. Desouza told Rita that he was a poor man and could not afford to gad about, and if she did not mind, he would introduce her to a very fine man, who had settled down in England, and was in a better position to show her the sights.

Rita had always regarded Desouza as a passable stop-gap. She had not taken kindly to him—nor he to her; so when Mr. Jaffer was brought in the way of Rita, she was glad of the chance of tormenting the stop-gap, who had given her companionship but no friendship.

Mr. Jaffer was a pearl merchant from Sindh, a partner of the well-known firm of Jaffer & Co., of Paris and London. He was about fifty and fond of travelling.

According to the tenets of his religion, he was entitled to four wives; he had only three, but none of them was educated, and moreover they lived in purdah, a life of seclusion. Mr. Jaffer found in Rita a striking contrast. His wives were cowering, obedient, and ever servile to him. Rita was self-assertive and pugnacious to a fault. From the very first she made Mr. Jaffer feel that it was he who had got to obey her, to which Jaffer tamely submitted. It was a refreshing change to a man who had tired of lording it over his women folk. He wanted to encounter resistance, because resistance gives an edge to enjoyment. What would life be if we never had resistance offered to our hopes, our aspirations, and our ambition! A life without change is only existence: it is not life. Jaffer wanted such a change, and he got it.

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## CHAPTER VIII

### JAFFER'S COURTSHIP

JAFFER was a pious Mahommedan. He said his prayers regularly five times a day, entertained the Mullahs, endowed the mosques, supported the Maktabas, and otherwise made free with his conscience. He had amassed a large fortune, but had no son to inherit after him. He had travelled widely, entertained largely, and except for his intense religious orthodoxy, he was a polished gentleman, who sang a song and relished one when sung.

He had long been wanting a lady companion who could preside at his tea, and take charge of his hospitality. He was a small, hollow-chested man, with the suspicion of a cough, which might be due to anything—asthma or incipient consumption.

He had engaged governesses and housekeepers galore, but they had had their own way, and for one reason or another he had been obliged to get rid of them. In Rita, he found a woman of his own land, and one whom he regarded as thoroughly civilized and up-to-date. He told her that "Allah had sent her as a solace to his old age." She did not relish the compliment, but Jaffer was blunt, tactless, and out-spoken, which brought him face to face with the virago, whose fire had in no way diminished; nor was her spirit quenched by the passage of time.

Jaffer had seen the influence of Western women, who ordered their husbands about as if they were their hired lackeys. He had now got an Eastern woman trained in Western ways; and he was bound to play his part in the economy of his social life.

Rita was soon introduced to the bosom of his family, as an honoured visitor, who demanded and compelled observance of the most splendid rules of oriental hospitality.

Jaffer specially commended Rita to his nephew, Imam, a lad of twenty-five, who had been the genius of Jaffer & Co.'s Paris office. He had to make frequent visits to London in the interest of his business, and he was in town now on one of them.

Imam told Rita of his Paris connection, and invited her to the gay capital. Rita was game for anything—she had come to Europe for a change ! She thanked the handsome young man for his kind invitation, but suggested asking his uncle for the necessary permission, as she was now Jaffer's guest and could not desert him at will.

Rita had been five months in England, of which she had spent only six weeks with the Jaffers.

When Imam proposed to "elope" with Rita, Jaffer humorously retorted that he was thinking of himself more than of Imam or his fair guest. He said he had just got to know his distinguished guest, and the laws of hospitality demanded that he should entertain her, which he had not yet done. He had to take her out sight-seeing, of which she had not completed her programme. Rita must see Paris, but he could take her with him as soon as they had finished with England.

Imam thought it selfish of his uncle, but he had to give way. However, he promised to send Rita some pictures from Paris, mentally hoping that it might hasten her visit.

Meanwhile Jaffer had his great festival of Id to prepare. Prayers in the mosque were to be followed by a grand banquet, to which all leading Indians were invited. Id is to the Moslem what Christmas is to the Christian—a great day for reunion and rejoicing.

Imam wanted to be with his uncle on the anniversary of this great festival; but Jaffer told him that, as head of the Paris House, he had better preside at the festivities there. Imam had to agree.

Rita was by no means a capable chatelaine, but she was accustomed to Indian ways. She got ready an assortment of Pulaos and curries, which the Indians had declared made their Id memorable. The few Europeans who were invited went away equally satisfied. Indian curries are really appetising, and their flavour, their taste and their delicate aroma can only be heightened by the dilzari ottomans, the restful divans, and the scented fountains amidst which they are served.

After the gentlemen had departed, it was the turn of the ladies, and they could be counted by the hundred. There were, amongst them, Indians, Persians, Jews, Armenians, Turks, and Europeans. It was a truly cosmopolitan gathering. The ladies had the option to eat squatting on pile carpets, while they washed their hands and feet with scented water. Those who preferred to eat at the table had their clothes saturated with dilbahar, a scent which defies the steam laundry, as clothes once

besprinkled with it have been known to emit the scent for the rest of their lives.

The diners sat down at one p.m., for Id is always a mid-day meal. By four o'clock it was over. The dinner being purdah, Rita represented Jaffer and thanked the assembled guests for their kindness in honouring the host. The ladies all thanked, in chorus, firstly the host and secondly his fair vice-regent. European ladies repeated their thanks to Mr. Jaffer in person. They said that he should be deeply indebted to Rita for the splendid arrangements she had made, and that she was a jewel of a woman and a queen of entertainers. Jaffer bowed his smiles.

At night, after saying his retiring prayers, he asked his slave Sally where Rita was, as he wanted to thank her once again before retiring for the night.

Sally returned with the news that Rita's room was locked, but that, peeping through the keyhole, she could see that the room was lighted. Jaffer thought that Rita might have gone to sleep omitting to switch off the light, so he sent Sally again. She returned with the news that Rita's room was empty, and that it had no light.

Jaffer expressed his surprise, and thought that she had visited two different suites. Rita's suite was the "Khorasan suite," so named because of its fine carpets from Khorasan; the adjacent suite was the "Sulemani suite," which was usually occupied by his nephew.

Sally was a stupid girl, and somewhat new to the place. She returned with the news that she had made a mistake on the previous occasion, but that after going through both the suites, she found

one locked with lights on, and the other open but empty, and without lights, and that this was Rita's chamber.

Jaffer thought it queer that there should be a light in Imam's suite, when Imam was in Paris. He knocked at the door, whereupon the light went out. Jaffer knocked again and again, but to no purpose. He was puzzled but sleepy, so he left and retired.

But he could not have had much sleep before the household was awakened by the sound of two pistol shots. Jaffer ran about in all directions, for he was thoroughly scared, till his steps were guided by Rita, who met him at the landing and pointed to Imam's rooms.

"There has been a murder there."

"Murder! Oh, Allah—who did it?" cried Jaffer.

"Go and see for yourself. They have had a quarrel—about something."

"Don't you feel frightened. Come with me—I will protect you."

"I will retire to my own rooms—it is safer," replied Rita. So saying, she left Jaffer to investigate. He rushed into Imam's room and found his nephew lying prostrate in a pool of blood. A few inches away from him was the body of Pantaloo, whom he had met ages ago on the Malabar coast when he was exporting timber. Both men were unconscious but still alive.

Jaffer telephoned for his doctor, who examined them, pronouncing the wounds serious but not dangerous. They were removed to the hospital, where the authorities informed the police, who

arrived on the scene and commenced an investigation. They questioned Jaffer, who referred them to Rita, who professed to know nothing beyond what Jaffer knew. She said that she had been awakened by the pistol shots, and only saw what Jaffer had witnessed.

After several weeks of careful nursing the two men became convalescent.

Pantaloo said that he had known Rita before her marriage—in fact, when they were both at school. She was married to Himm, but he continued to love her. When she started on a tour, she asked him to accompany her. He was a contractor, and possessed fair means, so he had promised to follow her, which he did. As Rita suddenly broke off all correspondence with him, he lost trace of her till they met at Jaffer's gathering.

Rita ignored him totally, and his vanity was wounded. After the reception, he asked her to go for a drive, in the course of which she told him that she was living at Jaffer's, but would be quite willing to see him, if Pantaloo came to her unobserved, as she did not care to arouse the curiosity of her host.

He had driven her back to her suite, and was in her company, when someone knocked at the door. It frightened him. He put out the light and adjourned into the next suite, which Sally said was vacant. As he lay there, someone tried to open the door from outside. A few moments later, a figure entered the room through another door, and questioned him as to his business there. He replied that he was a guest of the house, and had stayed on for the night.



"But, how did you get into the room?" asked the stranger. "No one had the key except myself and the porter."

Pantaloo replied that he had found the room unlocked. The stranger thought it was all right, welcomed him, and asked him to join in a drink. He did so, and probably drank not too wisely, for he began to tell tales. Imam asked him if he knew Rita, to which he cried, "Rather!"

Imam asked for details, which the drunken Pantaloo gave freely, even adding a detail or two to complete his picture. Imam challenged him to a duel, but Pantaloo suggested Rita as an arbitrator, to which Imam agreed.

Imam fetched Rita, and asked her if she knew Pantaloo. She denied having met him before the reception, but said that, after the reception, he asked her for a night's accommodation. Considering him respectable, she let him into Imam's suite, of which she had the key—which she kept for him.

Imam was satisfied with Rita's explanation, but Pantaloo was not. He was bellicose, so Imam and he had a fight. They might have exchanged shots, but they did not remember.

When Rita was questioned about these points, she denied everything beyond what she had already admitted. The case began to arouse public interest.

Rita had not written to Himm for a long time, but the news reached his ears. Rita wrote to her husband that she had secretly married Jaffer, and Himm thought that the day of his deliverance had at last come. He was a free man once more! He slept the sleep of the blessed.

## CHAPTER IX

### RITA MARRIES JAFFER

THE day after the drunken brawl between Imam and Pantaloo, Jaffer sent Sally to offer his compliments to Rita and request an interview. The relationship between Jaffer and Rita had become one of diminishing conventionality, but whenever Jaffer would bespeak her prolonged presence, he sent her notice of his visit. It was three o'clock in the afternoon. Rita had an engagement at half-past, so could only see Mr. Jaffer for a few minutes.

"Rita, I have come to thank you for your excellent management of my Id."

"You have thanked me already for it, Mr. Jaffer. And, moreover, the thanks then as now are not well deserved."

"No, no, Mrs. Hamlin told me that you were a paragon of a woman for the management of large parties, and my business compels me to entertain largely. Moreover, I am a religious man."

Rita smiled with becoming humility. It encouraged Mr. Jaffer to improve his advantage with Rita.

"Rita, you know that I am in love with you, and, by Allah, I shall be a good husband to you. I wanted to celebrate the Id by marrying you last night, but the drunken brawl of those scoundrels prevented me from achieving my purpose. How-

ever, the festival lasts for three days, and to-day is the second."

"This is so sudden, Mr. Jaffer—I have never thought about marriage. In fact, I do not know what marriage means."

"You must know now," he cried. "By Allah, marriage is——"

"A lottery?"

"Yes, Rita, a lottery, but one in which the stakes at times are heavy. I have drawn in you the first prize."

"But you have three wives already. Why do you want a fourth?"

"Because the holy Koran allows it, and I am a religious man."

"But I am a Christian—how can I marry you?"

"By Allah, it is easy. I have Mullaji waiting downstairs; he will take your religion and give you mine in one moment, and he will also make us man and wife at the same time."

"But, Mr. Jaffer, it is so sudden—neither you nor I have had sufficient time to think. Let us take more time."

"No, Rita, no, I am passionately in love with you. I want a drawing-room wife and you must be that one."

"But you have your brother and your nephew, and, I suppose, other relations, as well as your Purdah wives. What will they think of your marriage?"

"I don't care what they think, Rita! I am going to marry you—not they."

"Yes, but haven't they a voice in the matter? You must consult them."

"Very well, I will consult them—I promise to do so. But you must marry me to-day."

Rita protested, but with each protest her opposition grew feebler. At half-past three Rita was to have met Mrs. Lahnum, the aged widow of a retired civilian, who had met Rita on the *Koh-i-noor*. She had forgotten the appointment, when her page boy announced a lady in the waiting-room.

Mr. Jaffer was greatly disconcerted at this intrusion, but he could not keep Rita from meeting a pre-engagement. He told her to finish with the lady soon, as the Mullaji was waiting downstairs.

"How do you do, Mrs. Himm? How are you?" was Mrs. Lahnum's greeting.

"I am quite well—how are you, Mrs. Lahnum?"

"Well, at my age, I am bound to be in indifferent health; but, all things considered, I am quite fit. How is Mr. Tomlins. Do you hear from him?"

"Occasionally. He is coming home again next week."

"Oh, you will be glad to meet him, I am sure. He is a fine fellow."

"Well, Mrs. Lahnum, a question torments me. You have the advantage of ripe judgment."

"Well, I am sixty-nine, so I have seen a little of the world. What is it, Rita—something seems to be worrying you."

"Yes, it is the eternal question of marriage."

"Oh, a fine question, Rita, a very fine question. I am greatly interested in marriage, for I have buried three husbands, so, Mrs. Himm, I ought to know something about it."

"Well, Mr. Jaffer wants me to marry him. So does his nephew, and so, I suppose, does Mr. Tomlins."

"Well, Rita, they are all fine men, but you cannot marry them all. Whom do you wish to marry?"

"That is the question upon which I wish to consult you. As a matter of fact, I don't know any of them," replied Rita.

"Well, some women marry money, some prefer gaiety, others marry for love. These are few, but, of course, there will always be neurotic women who are silly that way."

"I should like to marry for all those reasons. I shall starve if my husband is poor, die if I am denied gaiety, and feel eternally miserable if my husband does not love me."

"Love is an education, Rita—it grows by degrees. As for gaiety, it has to be purchased. The thing then is to marry money! If you have money, you can purchase love from the chemist, and gaiety at the draper's. But without money—well, without money, death is preferable to life."

"Jaffer has money, and so has Imam, but Tomlins is poor, yet I love him."

"You love a poor man!" cried Mrs. Lahnum.  
"Rita, your mind must be diseased."

"Well, Tomlins is a strapping strong man."

"Rita, dear, if I were you, I should play for money."

"Even then, there is some difficulty, for there is Jaffer and there is Imam."

"Well, Imam is younger."

"And stronger," added Rita.

"Yes, and he is quite a nice-looking boy. But he may marry again, whereas Jaffer cannot."

"Oh, yes, he can! His law permits him to divorce us at any moment."

"For no reason whatever?"

"Yes, for no reason whatever."

"But he would have to pay you your mehar."

"Of course, he has got to do that," agreed Rita.

"Then you are perfectly safe."

"But suppose I want to have him, and he doesn't—if he is cruel to me?"

"Then you can leave him, I suppose."

"It seems a queer custom."

"I don't know. I think the Mohammedan marriage is the most advanced notion of marriage. It is a civil contract, and may be dissolved as such."

"But what about the poor wife!"

"I don't suppose it entails any hardship. She gets her dower, and if she does not, it was her business to secure it."

"But it looks so queer, this buying and selling sort of business."

"The finest painting looks a daub, if viewed the wrong way!" retorted the old lady.

Mr. Jaffer lost his patience. He had been coughing significantly for several minutes, and now he ventured to knock. Rita shouted, "Just a minute more, please," for she was anxious to wind up Mrs. Lahnum's interview.

Mrs. Lahnum understood! She asked Rita to engage her as her housekeeper, governess, or lady companion, as things were not going smoothly upon her small pittance. Rita smiled encouragingly. The door opened, and as Mrs. Lahnum went out, Jaffer came in, looking at his wrist-watch.

"Do you know that it is nearly six!" he demanded.

"Really, I didn't think it was so late, and I have to go out at six. I am already late."

"Go where, Rita? I am dying to have a few minutes with you, but you are for ever going out or someone is coming in."

"I can give you a few minutes."

"All right—Mullaji, come in!"

Mullaji had been waiting by arrangement. He came in, and began to read the Kalma (the article of faith), and before Rita knew where she was, she had become a convert to Islam and had been married to Mr. Jaffer.

"I did not intend to do this in a hurry," she protested. "Moreover, I have not had a chance to consult my friends. In fact, I was going out to meet them, and I must do so now."

"Mrs. Haroun Jaffer, now you are my wife, I can keep you in purdah, but I wanted a drawing-room wife and promised to make you one. I am a true believer, and shall not deceive."

"But I did not consent to marry you, Mr. Jaffer!"

"Well, dearest wife, our marriage is a mutah for a year. If you wish to change your mind, you may do so at the next Id."

"What! You can discard me after a year?"

"Not without payment of your dower, which I have fixed at fifty dinars and five ashrafis."

"How much is that?" asked Rita.

"Say sixty thousand rupees—about four thousand pounds."

"What will be my fate if you die?"

"You are my heir, and if Allah blesses us with an issue, it is perfectly legitimate."

Rita was not averse to marrying Jaffer. She had had no communication from Himm for a long time, and Mr. Pantaloo, who had at one time been a lawyer's clerk, had assured him that that sufficed to snap the marriage tie. She would stipulate for some jewellery as his love offering.

Jaffer was waiting impatiently for Rita to accompany him to his rooms, so she had to telephone to Imam, at the hospital, that his uncle had made it impossible for her to see him.

"Mr. Jaffer," she began, "you have known me for nearly three months, but you have made me no present."

"I have presented myself to you!"

"Yes, but in that queer mutah marriage, of which I know so little. I want you to make me a wedding present."

"Certainly, certainly! Take this ring—it can be altered, and it is a fine brilliant."

"No, I want a pearl necklace as well."

"Very well, I will make one for you to-morrow or the day after. You see, owing to our Id, our firm is closed for three days. But I promise you, Rita, that you shall have a pearl necklace."

Rita was now Mrs. Jaffer, but she was not quite happy about it. She liked to live in luxury and opulence, but her heart went out to Mr. Tomlins, and she had a secret admiration for Imam as well. As for Pantaloo, he was the friend of her youth—a sort of a privileged libertine, and he did not count.

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## CHAPTER X

### STELLA AND THE COUNT

WHILE Rita thus entered into bonds of matrimony with the pearl merchant, her friend Stella was doing Europe with the Count. She wrote to Rita of the good things she was enjoying, praising the Count for his *bonhomie* and munificence. She read to the Count Rita's account of her marriage to a millionaire, and she envied her, for Stella was jealous—what woman is not !

The Count made light of such a *mariage de convenance*, which he said was little short of concubinage. Stella demurred to that expression.

"What then do you call a real marriage ?" she asked.

"Ah, a real marriage is more than I can define."

"But you don't like a girl marrying for money ?"

"No, my dear, no !"

"Then I suppose you want her to marry for love ?"

"Ah, yes, certainly, Stella ! That is my real idea of marriage."

"But love does not hatch in a day," she protested. "It grows . . ."

"And diminishes !"

"Yes, it diminishes. Is marriage to stand on such sands ?"

"Well, I am no philosopher, but a man of the world, and I have always heard that love is necessary for happiness."

"Ah, but love and marriage are two things apart."

"Well, we will not argue, Stella. As I said, I am no philosopher, and I venture to doubt if even philosophers know much about love."

Stella was no good at arguments, nor was the Count. They were two plain people who saw things on the surface, and were often deceived by appearances. To them, the glamour of a Court was far more important than the accumulation of wealth, or love—not that the Count despised money-making. If he had, he would not have given Stella a taste for gambling—nor would he have run through his large fortune which he had amassed from the pork trade.

Three months of combined dissipation and gambling had pauperised the Count, and his means were now slender. He wanted to avoid the Casino, but Stella would not let him. She still hoped against hope that the Count's affairs would mend themselves. But they did not—as Stella discovered to her cost, when, on rising one morning from her bed, she found the Count missing from the Pension.

She enquired about him, but no one could give her any clue. She was penniless, while the Count's luggage had, every day, been getting beautifully less. What little was left of it had disappeared with him.

Now all this happened at the St. Augustin S. Sa, that favourite spot on the Riviera below the Alps, where the splendour of the mountain scenery

blends with the gorgeousness of the sea. It is a place which boasts of a Suicide Hall, where love-lorn and self-shorn souls are lulled to quiet by painless extermination. It is the lethal chamber to which the high and the mighty, the scamp and the impecunious, resort for mortal absolution.

As soon as a visitor is missing from any Pension, the first tip the porter gives is to call at the "Abbey"—as this place is euphemistically called.

Stella went to the Abbey and learnt the truth. She was given an envelope, which she tore open with trembling hands. It said :

"MY DEAR STELLA,

I have no heart to speak to you or to kiss you before I make my last journey. The fact is that I have been dead broke for some time, but had hoped that things would right themselves. Instead of doing that, things have gone from bad to worse. They cannot be worse now, for I have been able to raise only a ten-franc piece on my clothes. It is yours ! I am now going to leave for another, and I hope a better world, where butchers will not pose as Counts and Casinos will be no more. Adieu."

So the Count had committed suicide ! She was now a penniless pauper in a foreign land. What was she to do—she must wire to Rita.

Rita's one redeeming feature was her amiability to comparative strangers. Moreover, she had been placed on the maenad of a millionaire, and she wanted to impress upon her friends the image of her new grandeur. So she wired some money to Stella, and offered more if necessary. It was just

sufficient to take Stella to Rita, who was cruising in the yacht with Jaffer.

Rita was an annual wife, and wanted to make the most of her temporary spousehood. Jaffer was having a slack season in winter, and as his cough had increased, he had been advised to take a cruise. It was mutually beneficial, and was easily arranged. Stella was welcome in the yacht, as Mrs. Lahnum, whom Rita had offered to employ, was not a good sailor.

In spite of her growing years, Stella was in the pink of condition. The Count had introduced her to "Society," and all its vanities, distractions, dissipations and pretence.

Stella was naturally a gay soul, and had not yet been yoked to married life, nor was she very anxious to be so. All the same, she had watched Rita's matrimonial antics, with which she had no sympathy. Jaffer was rich, but he was not a social figure, for his personality was nothing, but his millions gave him strength.

Rita and Stella had parted as lukewarm friends. Rita now dressed in her Indian costume before Europeans, and in European costume before Indians. It impressed them! She met Stella cordially.

"I am delighted to see you, Stella, after such a long age."

"So am I, Rita dear. But you must feel that I have come to be a burden to you."

"Not at all. In fact, I sadly needed a companion, and now I have got one."

"I feel happy that you say so. I have been wondering how you would take my reappearance."

"You look remarkably well for your age."

"Thank you so much, Rita. Who is that tall man leaning against the banister?"

"Oh, he is Imam, the nephew of the master."

"What is he here for?" asked Stella.

"He has been called in by the master, whose cough is worse. I have been trying my quackery upon him, and it seems to have done him good."

At this moment there staggered in a pale old man with a grisly beard, in a long frock coat, surmounted by a fiery fez.

"Is this your husband?" asked Stella.

"Yes, he is Mr. Jaffer."

Rita beckoned Jaffer to join them, though the invitation was unnecessary, as he was already gravitating towards them. So was Imam, whom nobody had asked.

"Is this the charming friend of my dear wife?" asked the old man.

"Mr. Jaffer, Miss Stella Heikle, Mr. Imam," muttered Rita.

Each man stepped forward and shook hands, and then seated himself on either side of Stella, discussing the weather and other equally interesting topics. Rita was silent. Jaffer had already become familiar with his wife's ferocity, but he had yet to discover her temper when roused by jealousy.

She stared about and then suddenly left Stella without saying a word. She went into her cabin and summoned Jaffer to her presence.

"So you have already started your game with that horrid woman!" she cried. "I won't stay here unless she is cleared off the yacht."

"My dear, what have I done to merit such an explosion. I have scarcely spoken to her."

"Didn't you call her my charming friend—fancy, a low habitue of the night clubs, a—well, a discarded strumpet being called my 'friend.'"

"My dear, it was a mere expression—all women are charming!"

"Shut up!" cried Rita. "I have found you out, you wicked old man. You married me in order to disgrace me. Never let me see your face again! I am glad I married you in mutah, for how could I have lived with an old whore-monger all my life. I will take opium and die, then your neck will be twisted, for I shall report before I die that you had poisoned me."

"I will go at once and get rid of that young lady," Jaffer suggested.

"You call her a 'young lady'—a rotten old hag, nearing forty!"

"Yes, I stand corrected. I will clear that old hag out of my ship."

"Only then will you be again admitted to my presence!" retorted Rita.

As Jaffer left, Rita followed. In her frenzy, her eyes were bloodshot, her teeth clenched, her hair flew in the air. She shouted that she would clear out the old thing herself! Jaffer tried to dissuade her from creating a public scene, for the yacht was a pleasure boat belonging to Sir Herbert Goodman, from whom he had chartered it. Its officers and crew were all on deck, and there was Imam. Rita was in a state of semi-nudity, for her clothes had parted company. She shoved Jaffer aside, and negotiating the steps by twos and threes, she

reached the spot where the "horrid woman" had been welcomed by her only a few minutes before.

There was no Stella and no Imam !

Rita was glaring in impotent rage in all directions for her quarry, when she heard the sound of merry-making proceeding from the direction of the bridge. Rita darted away, but her déshabillé and wild look had already drawn the attention of the skipper, who stood at the head of the ladder and sternly motioned Rita to go back.

"But I am the wife of Mr. Jaffer !" she protested.

"You cannot come on the bridge."

"But is Stella there ?"

"I cannot engage in conversation with you, madam."

"But I want to see her !" protested Rita.

"Madam, I have already told you that I am on duty, and cannot do anything else—will you please withdraw from here immediately."

Rita was cowed by the sternness of the skipper. Foiled in her attempt to execute her wish, she threatened to throw herself overboard. She looked around, but found that no one was taking any notice of her, so she feared that, if she went over, she might find no rescuers. She shouted in an incoherent voice : "I am going to drown myself !"

A coxswain was passing that way and ironically remarked, "You won't succeed, ma'am—the sharks will gobble you up before you are drowned !"

The cool way in which Rita's bluster was taken by all concerned made her even more furious. She made for her state cabin, where she knew Jaffer must be at his evening prayers. Rita went straight

to him, and taking him by the shoulders, shook him, yelling in a stentorian voice : " You hypocrite and pharisee—you dare to pray after your infernal crime ! "

Jaffer hurried through his prayers, dodging his persecutor, till Imam—who had been praying in the next cabin—hurried to his uncle's rescue.

" Rita," he cried, " go back and dress, and hide your shame. Go back at once ! "

" What have you got to do with me ?—I'm not speaking to you ! " she screamed.

" Will you obey me, or do you want me to push you bodily out of the ship ? I won't have a scene here, you understand ? "

" Don't mind her, nephew, she is mad ! " whispered Jaffer. " She has lost her temper. "

" You call me mad, you old ruffian ! Take that ! " Rita struck him with her slipper on the face.

Imam seized her hand and dragged her out of the presence of Jaffer.

" Come in here and sit down. I will deal with you. " He was a stern man and carried a shikar knife in his waist. Rita shivered.

" Imam dear, why are you so cruel to me ? " she asked.

" I have got to be cruel for your own sake. You are a disreputable wretch, and if you don't behave, I will cut your throat and throw your body to the sharks. Do you hear ? "

" I am thirsty, Imam. Bring me some water to drink. "

" No, not till you have apologized to me, and to my uncle, for your rude behaviour, and given me a



promise that you will not touch Stella while she is our guest."

"I will promise anything. . . . I am so thirsty."

"No, repeat these words after me. 'I, Rita Haroun Jaffer, feel ashamed of my conduct towards my husband and towards his nephew.' No, don't repeat those words, I can take care of myself. 'I promise solemnly to treat Stella as my guest, and will not molest her or hurt her feelings while she is on this boat.'"

Rita was biting her lips as she went on repeating the words.

"You are not contrite yet. You must come with me to my uncle, kneel before him, and ask his pardon."

Rita did as she was ordered, and Imam left her with Jaffer. No sooner had Imam gone, than Rita was her old fierce self again, and turned savagely to Jaffer.

"You old villain, and bastard son of your mother, you have humiliated me before everybody. Now it is my turn. Go down upon your knees before me, and ask my pardon for having publicly insulted me!"

"Do as I order, will you, and repeat these words after me—take this Koran in your hand, and say, 'I, Mamun Jaffer, do hereby express regret for insulting my wife and I ask her forgiveness. I will have nothing to do with Stella, and will ask her to leave the ship as soon as I see her, without telling Imam or anyone else about it. So God be praised, Amen.'"

Jaffer obeyed Rita, but tried to go one better and plant a kiss; but Rita bade him not to touch her.

The dinner gong now sounded, so Jaffer asked Rita what he should bring for her meal.

"Get away from my presence. I don't care to see your grisly face."

Imam, Stella, and the officers of the ship had entered the dining-room, but Jaffer had not come. Imam said that he would fetch his uncle, and see if he was indisposed. He knocked at Jaffer's state-room, and his uncle coughed.

"Don't open the door!" cried Rita.

"Is that you, Rita, again—I am Imam. Let the door be opened."

The key was turned and the door opened. Imam asked his uncle and aunt to dress. Rita said that she had a racking headache and must be excused. Imam knew that it was an excuse, so he repeated his request. Rita feared another scene in public, for she had seen Imam when he was on the warpath. She dressed hastily and followed Imam to the dining-room.

As the dinner ended and the table was cleared for drinks, Imam proposed Stella's health.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I feel privileged to propose the health of our charming guest, Miss Stella Heikle. She has dropped like a houri from the clouds to dispel our loneliness, and I am sure all feel grateful to her for honouring us. My uncle and my aunt join with me in heartiest welcome, and I ask you to drink her health."

The toast was received with musical honours, and the company then called upon Jaffer for a speech. Jaffer protested that he was a man of action, and his nephew had left him nothing to say. The company then shouted to Rita :

"Mrs. Jaffer, a speech."

Rita smiled—or tried to do so—and added that she too had been anticipated by her nephew. More drinks went round. It was now past midnight, but an alfresco concert was arranged, in which Stella sang a song, "The parting of ways." It brought the house down, and she was encored and again encored till it became almost a single star concert.

In the small hours of the early morning, the party dispersed, and as Rita led Jaffer to their room, the old man wished that the concert had never ended.

As Rita entered the cabin, she made sure that the door was locked. She then undressed, and as Jaffer was about to do the same, she turned fiercely and ordered him to sleep in his day clothes, and never to take them off till he had carried out his promise.

"What promise, darling?" he asked.

"Why, you have soon forgotten it, you senile dunderhead! Did you not promise to turn that horrid woman out of the boat?"

"But I thought that was all over after our speeches."

He was now in the grip of a determined woman, but again attempted to undress. Rita at once sat up, which was enough to stagger Jaffer. He put on the coat again and lay down.

"Your coat is hurting me! Take it off! You're an old idiot to come near me to sleep, in your day clothes—they are stinking of attar, which has given me a headache."

This was true, for the overpowering scent of attar was causing nausea to everyone.


She made him take off all the clothes that were saturated with attar, and threw them into the waste

linen box, closing the lid, but the scent was overpowering. So she told him to remove the clothes to the music room, which he did.

But as the scent was still strong, she sniffed his body all over, and ordered him to have a bath. It was a cold raw morning, and Jaffer shuddered to face a bath. He said that he would sleep in the music-room, and take a bath next morning.

But Rita would not let him do this, for Stella was sure to hear about it, and would start a scandal about her.

Jaffer was suffered to stay the night, which he did, dreading the morning, when he would have to make good his promise.



## CHAPTER XI

### STELLA'S FIRST MORNING

NEXT morning Jaffer got up early ; he had not slept, for he was worrying all the time how he was going to turn Stella out without creating a scene.

Imam and Stella were also early in the dining-room, sipping their coffee.

Rita ordered tea in her own room ; then she bathed and put on a flapper costume, with her pearls and diamonds, to spite Stella before she left the ship. By the time she came into the reception room, the sun had risen high.

Imam saw his aunt making for the dining-room, so he advanced to receive her, seating her by his side. Stella sat next to him. He began cracking jokes about the concert, which had turned every one crazy, and praised Stella as a star who should have taken to the stage. She sang divinely !

After they had finished breakfast, Mr. Jaffer came in, and Stella approached to welcome him. She attended to his wants, and Jaffer felt that he had had a satisfying meal, which tasted all the more delicious because it had received the touch and thought of fair Stella.

Rita was watching the scene, but Imam was there. Rita knew that she was in the grip of an iron will, and so long as she was with Imam, she had to control

herself as best she could. But the storm was brewing within her.

Stella had already become the prime favourite of the boat, while *she* had been relegated to the back bench. Her previous day's conduct was upon every lip. The more rabid she became the more submissive Jaffer was to her will. It was not the best means of dealing with such creatures, but such was Jaffer's mentality. He had oppressed his purdah wives so much, and for so long, that it gave him a pleasant sensation to be oppressed by a woman.

However, he did not escape the curtain lecture after he had finished his breakfast. As he entered his cabin, Rita eyed around, turned the key, and demanded an explanation of his conduct.

"Have you turned that woman out, as you promised?"

"No, dear; but I am looking for an opportunity."

"To flirt with her?"

"No, to . . ."

"To insult me?"

Jaffer assumed a hang-dog appearance. It was his habit to place his hands behind his back, and with bent head to scan the traceries of the Persian carpets of his saloon. Rita would then approach to close quarters, and fix her eyes upon the stooped figure, which had the effect of putting to flight such little mother-wit as he could have put together to meet these emergencies.

At the present moment, Jaffer was at bay. He told Rita that he could not get rid of anyone at a moment's notice. Rita threatened to deal with the woman herself, though she had no idea how she was

going to do it. This removed the load off Jaffer's back, and he breathed a sigh of relief.

As already stated, Rita had long been expecting the return of Tomlins—he was her sheet anchor. She had attracted him by the reports of her wealth and ostentatious luxury. She sent off a code message to his London address, asking him to meet her immediately, mentioning the port where the ship would heave-to for him.

Tomlins was waiting for such a message, and he boarded the boat at the appointed time. Rita now vowed that, by his aid, she would be avenged both against Stella and her cavalier defender, Imam. She would not forget, or forgive the old man, either. He would drink to the full her cup of retaliation and revenge ! She told Tomlins her plans. He was assigned the principal guest cabin, next to Stella's. Jaffer was curious to know something about his uncouth guest, and questioned Rita.

“ Rita, you have not introduced me to your friend.”

“ I met him some years ago, in a boat, and we have been writing to each other now and then.”

“ What nationality does he belong to ? ”

“ I don't think he belongs to any nationality ! ”

Rita had truthfully told her husband all she knew about Tomlins, and Jaffer was not prepossessed in his favour. It was his rule to welcome all his guests, so after dinner he welcomed Tomlins, as he had only a few days before welcomed Stella.

Tomlins and Rita were pleased by the welcome ; in fact Rita showed her satisfaction by burying the hatchet with Jaffer, to whom she was exceptionally affectionate that night. She undressed him herself,

combed his beard, made his sherbet, put him to bed, and massaged his feet, which she had only done once or twice before, to mark her special sense of gratitude or pleasure.

For several days, Rita mentioned nothing about Stella. She used to chat with her, and it seemed as if the storm of her revenge had blown over. She whispered no word about her to Tomlins—though Tomlins was showing himself specially attentive to Stella. In fact, judging from the way they behaved in public, it would seem that he had already far advanced in “carrying on” with her. Imam once referred to her about it.

“Stella, people are already talking about your friendliness to Tomlins.”

“They must have something to talk about !” she replied.

“But why give them an occasion ? Stella, do you love me ?”

“I have never felt the call of love yet,” she answered evasively.

“Really ! You have never loved anyone—you have never felt that you could love ? How could you have passed so many years without loving someone ?”

“I don’t say that I have not loved, but that I have never felt the call of love.”

“Stella, you are getting mysterious. Come now, have you loved or not ?”

“Yes and no. It all depends upon what you call love. Can you define it ?”

“Yes, I can. For instance, my feeling towards you.”

“That is no definition ; it might mean anything.”



"Stella, love means the liking which prompts marriage."

"If love prompted marriages, there would be no divorces!" retorted Stella.

"But they come afterwards."

"Yes, but they are inherent in the system. They show how fickle people are. They are transported by a momentary fancy, and then repent—often when it is too late."

"But our system is an ideal one. We marry, and are free to divorce our wives whenever we like, but we have, of course, to pay the price."

"There is no mutual right!"

"If there were, women would often run the risk of being cheated out of their rights."

"That is true," Stella agreed. "Marriage is an obsolete institution, and I don't like it. I want a complete overhaul."

"But till that time comes, we have to carry on," retorted Imam.

"Yes, just carry on—as the horse marries the donkey, and the product is the mule."

The conversation was now getting more animated, and it attracted Tomlins and Rita, who had been pacing the deck.

"Who is the donkey, and who is the mule?" asked Tomlins.

"I suppose I am the donkey! Were you referring to me, Stella?" put in Rita.

"I was not referring to anyone. I was jerking out an analogy to illustrate my point—the eternal question of love."

"Love! Why, what has the donkey got to do with love?" demanded Tomlins.

"The whole universe is bound by it—it is the universal energy. So the scripture says."

"But love must be real love," cried Rita.

"That is just what we were hitting at—what is real love?"

"Well, it is the love one realizes only when one is in the Divorce Court," Tomlins suggested.

"But is there anything like true love in this world?" asked Rita.

"There is, but it is a gem of purest ray serene, and is rare," replied Stella sentimentally.

"My uncle's love of my aunt is an instance," remarked Imam viciously.

He had no doubt spoken truthfully, but his manner was mistaken for irony.

"Or Stella's love for you!" replied Rita. Stella blushed, and protested that Rita was getting too personal. She would have been nearer the mark if she had said that she was getting too unmannerly. But it was Rita all over.

"My love is locked. It cannot open except to a golden key," she said.

"I did not think you so mercenary," replied Imam.

"All things in this world are mercenary—it is money that makes the mare to go!"

"But surely there must be some pleasures that money cannot buy," he protested.

"But they are not of this world. They belong to the world beyond."

"But how can we enjoy them here?" he asked.

"We can and do, if we have a glimpse of the other world."

Stella was getting too abstruse and it was a

happy turn for Rita. It bored Tomlins, who nudged Rita to leave, which they did, Stella following.

Tomlins and Imam were running an even race for Stella's favours. There were others—Jaffer was one, but his dread of Rita had subdued his passion. The skipper was another. In fact, Stella was the only female figure in the boat whose beauty and wit had made her the cynosure of all eyes, above and below the bridge.

Rita ascribed her husband's growing indifference to her magnetic personality. Imam had been one of her gallants, but he was now turning his face towards the shining Stella. So was Tomlins. She could trust no one! She would, however, sound Tomlins about herself, and took the earliest opportunity to do so.

"Tomlins," she began, "you know that, after the next Id, I give up Jaffer—I cease to be his wife."

"You wrote to me about it. But he might renew his marriage."

"Even if he does, I am not going to accept him again. He is too sickly for me, and too peevish."

"But he has made you happy."

"You mean comfortable."

"Well, comfort brings happiness."

"Not always. Comfort is of the body, happiness of the mind. I am most comfortable, but most unhappy."

"I would make myself that, if I were you, Rita. Life is too short to be wasted in worries. Cultivate a happy-go-lucky temper, and don't mind disappointments. That is how I live."

"I am trying to live the same way, but I can't!" she complained. "Just as I am about to succeed, something comes in the way and destroys my peace of mind."

"For instance?"

"Stella!"

"What has Stella got to do with your unhappiness? You are married now—what do you care about Stella?" he asked.

"That is just why I care about her."

"Does she flirt with your husband—not likely!"

"She hasn't done so yet, but she is a terrible flirt and might begin doing so any day."

"When she does begin, it will be time for your worry. Why anticipate?" he retorted.

"But, Tomlins, I ask you a question. Do you love me?"

"I have always done so, since we met. Do you doubt it?"

"I don't, but you have been getting rather too free with Stella."

"Free, certainly," he admitted, "but too free, certainly not. Rita, guard your tongue—I have always to check you."

"But it causes me worry—for you know that I love you."

"I have never doubted it—that's why I am here. But what has that to do with Stella?"

"Stella is a flirt, and might seduce you."

"If she does . . ."

"Then it will be too late!" cried Rita. At this stage Jaffer was seen hurrying towards them.

"That wretched eavesdropper again!" added Rita.

“Steady, Rita. Remember that you are under a marriage vow.”

“I made no vow ! He forced me into it.”

“Even so you have since accepted him.”

Jaffer now joined them, and said that as the boat required provisioning, he was thinking of changing its course to Timbuctoo. Tomlins looked at Rita, who was glum. It was tacitly agreed, and in due course the boat anchored off the harbour of Timbuctoo.

## CHAPTER XII

### PENNY FORTUNE TELLER

A MOTLEY crowd of Arabs, Moroccans, Bedouins, Riffs, Corsicans, and what not, crowded the companion. Some brought fish, others melons, while a crowd of fortune tellers was let loose from the barrack-room of Destiny. They read faces, they felt bumps, they read hands, and they were interminably voluble in their predictions.

One of them, Ibu Sayyid, seized hold of Rita's hand. He read it, but spoke nothing. Tomlins was looking at Rita's hand and was struck by the silence of the man. He asked him why he was not divining, and Ibu replied that he never divined in public. He would, however, tell Rita all he knew about her in private. Rita retorted that she had nothing to conceal from Tomlins.

"So be it," muttered Ibu. "Very good, plenty money, plenty husbands, plenty health, plenty children. Ah ! Ah ! Your temper like dynamite. Very good ! Ah ! I see an old man, crooked, bent. Is it so ? My eyes no good now. Ah, very good—very good. A lover after you now. Very good, very good. Any other question, madam ?"

"You are an old liar ! I don't believe a single word of what you say."

"Rita, you may believe or not," said Tomlins,

but has he no right to speak? He is doing his best for you, poor fellow." Then, turning to the sooth-sayer, he added, "Tell me what more you can read in her hand. Mind, don't lie!"

"I am not going to show him my hand any more," Rita protested.

"Rita, open your hand, will you! There, Mr. Soothsayer, go ahead!"

"Sir, I am an old man, and the lady has already called me a liar. I am a liar. I live by lying. If I told the truth, no one would give me any money."

"Don't waste my time! Tell us what more you can read in her palm."

"No, sir, I can't read any more. I am getting blind."

It was no use palavering with him, for he had been frightened into silence. Tomlins called Stella, who was busy having her hand read by a youthful vaticinator.

"Now look at this hand and read it," he said to Ibu.

"Ah! Ah! Queen's hand. Very good, very good. No so many husbands, but quite good. Yes, plenty money to come, very shortly. Very rich marriage—character line—ah! I am losing my sight, I cannot see—but it must be there. Ah, it is there—snake like, very clear now. Long age; very long—death by drowning. Far off yet. Very far off. Plenty children, but children no good."

Ibu was unduly circumspect after what he had just witnessed. He said that if he got his buckshees first, he would speak more truthfully and freely.

Tomlins was not in favour of prepayment, but

Rita was. She said she would hear him in private, which, of course, would not exclude Tomlins. Ibu then retired with her into the privacy of her ante-room, and continued, "Ah, you are a born tragedienne. Very brave wife. Husbands all obedient—except one or two. Plenty money. Ah ! I see you lose it too. Never mind, but you get nice husband. Present husband very good, very good."

Ibu closed his ibadamanthos somewhat abruptly, for Rita had struck terror into him. But there was the staying hand of Tomlins.

"It is a fiasco, he has said nothing," he protested.

"No, nothing at all, except that I have money," Rita agreed, much relieved.

"Which, however, you will lose !"

"Yes, unless I am careful," she retorted.

Ibu asked Tomlins to show him his hand, but he declined to read it in the presence of anyone. Rita insisted upon being present, reminding Tomlins that she had not excluded him ; Tomlins told Ibu that he could fire away, not minding the lady, who was his close relation.

"Ah, then, I will compare the two hands," he said. He told them that the two hands were destined to be joined and disjoined. He saw it clearly ! Then to Tomlins he added : "You have a fine hand, sir ; strong will, great power over women. Marry twice. First wife faithless, second wife faithful. First wife bring money, second wife happiness. Money, yes, not too much. Good small money. Death, drowning, sir ; far off yet. Don't fear."

This interlude was amusing, but of doubtful interest to the parties concerned. Stella was in high



glee over her fortune, which, she said, had been confirmed by three fortune tellers. This caused Rita to show her hand to others, but the fortune tellers appeared to have conspired to use, more or less, the same formula. Rita suspected that they had all been bribed by Stella, which was only partially true, as Stella had certainly disbursed larger bucks than either Rita or Tomlins.

## CHAPTER XIII

### RETURN HOME

THE yacht had been at sea over six weeks, and had cruised round the Mediterranean. The inclemency of the season was now abating, and Imam was anxious to go to Paris. Rita was anxious to dismiss Stella, while Stella was anxious to spite Rita. Tomlins was anxious to return to duty. So all were anxious to return, and they did return.

Their boat dropped anchor off Ostend, when Imam left for Paris, and Stella accompanied him. Rita was left with Tomlins. She had sent for him to avenge herself upon Imam and Stella, but had failed to meet her expectations.

Rita thought Tomlins was hopelessly obtuse ; she had gone as far as was discreet—she could go no further without betraying herself. Tomlins had, of course, long understood the drift of her questions. He envied Rita her money, but he would prefer Stella, if only she were less frivolous. But Stella was a gay butterfly, and would be a costly wife. He was a mechanic, living on three hundred a year. That amount would soon go in my lady's wardrobe ! She was out of the question. As for Rita, she had money and a temper, passable looks, and many mis-accomplishments. But he knew how to tame her temper, and the rest did not matter. It was too early

to propose ; he would take time to consider, and consult his "pal," Celestian.

Tomlins had had a long chat with Jaffer, who seemed very pleased with him. He invited him to his next Id as his private guest, and at his cost. He assured him of every consideration.

Rita parted from Tomlins with tearful eyes. They kissed each other, and he left for Sheffield.

Left alone with Jaffer, Rita was herself again. She passed in review all his misdeeds, and every night treated him to a set of curtain lectures upon his rotten character. Jaffer always had one answer to all her castigations—"Yes, my dear !" he agreed with everything she said ; he agreed even with all her contradictions. It merely sufficed to heap more fuel upon the fire ; but by midnight the Inquisition was closed, and except for an occasional scorpion sting, the remaining weeks passed uneventfully.

Meanwhile, Imam and Stella were in Paris. Imam had been fully married, but he took a great liking to Stella, promised to give a discharge to one of his wives, and put her in her place.

Stella was an astute business woman. She had not travelled far without gathering pebbles from the roadside. She knew that Imam was a fine man, and would make a good husband ; but she equally knew her social activities would be greatly curtailed by him.

Jaffer was a safer man, though older. But old age is often an asset to a young wife, for it gives hostage to ill-treatment. These considerations were in themselves indecisive ; but what influenced Stella was her spirit of revenge. She had to be square with Rita who had been insulting and impressing her

alternatively. She was above insulting Rita, but would impress her by sitting in her throne, without which Rita would feel jealous, and would give worlds to burn her with jealousy. This was her plan.

As for poor Tomlins, she had been encouraging him towards the same end. He was used as the main brake to Rita, and as one with whom a little flirtation did no harm, but did Rita a great deal of damage by rousing her to insensate fury. It was fine fun.

Imam wanted Tomlins to tell him all about Rita's past. He was anxious that the money Rita had earned should not go out of the family. For that purpose he was prepared to marry Rita, even if Jaffer refused to do so. It is true that he had taken a real fancy to Rita, but things were now changed by Stella's orientation on the horizon. He was a man with a powerful will, but not of the strength that Tomlins possessed. He could manage Rita, but could not avoid a scene.

## CHAPTER XIV

### PREPARATIONS FOR THE SECOND ID

IN the next year Id happened to fall on Tuesday, the twenty-second of June. Jaffer was entitled to Rita's wifehood till the next day, for it had been a day after the last Id that he had married her. He gave Imam a couple of months to look up his business, summoning him to London about the fifteenth for the Id.

Last year, Imam had been anxious to be in London because he had met Rita. This year he was anxious to remain in Paris, as he had met Stella, who was his guest. He wrote to his uncle to that effect, whereupon the old man asked him to bring Stella with him. He also sent Mr. Tomlins a timely invitation not to fail to attend the Id celebration "at his humble abode."

Tomlins was due in India by the fifteenth of June, and could not leave his work. He mentioned the matter to his boss, who told him that he had already cabled to India, detaining him till August, as the completion of the machinery he was to take out with him had been delayed by the miners, and by the sympathetic general strike all over England. It was impossible for him to leave England, even if he wanted to do so. He accepted Jaffer's invitation.

When Imam mentioned the summons he had received for Stella, she felt affronted.

"Why didn't he invite me, if he wanted me to be his guest? I don't like his roundabout ways. What will Rita think of me, if I go uninvited, or, what is worse, on such an informal invitation?"

"Stella, I don't want him to invite you, for then you cannot refuse and I cannot detain you. I want the matter to remain as it is, till it is too late for him to invite you with me, and I can't go, leaving you alone here."

"But I want to take part in the jollifications!" she protested.

"In that case, I shall have to go too, and this I am trying to avoid. We shall have greater jollifications here in the gay capital, than in drab London."

"But I have to be even with Rita," she insisted.

"Stella, you need not trouble about her. Her mutah will be over next Id, when she will cease to be Jaffer's wife or my aunt."

"But she does not cease to be my friend!"

"Suppose I made an agreeable proposal—would you listen to me?"

"Certainly, if it is agreeable to my wishes."

"Of course, I meant it in no other sense. You are an educated and accomplished lady, I am considered a good business man. I helped Jaffer & Co. to retrieve their fortune, when the last crash came, and pearl merchants were dying like flies. Now, as you know, I love you! I am an ambitious man. My uncle has a drawing-room wife, I want to have one, and where can I get a lady more presentable than yourself? I am healthy and strong, and God willing, we shall have a long and happy married life before us."

"You are going too fast! I haven't married you

yet, while you are thinking of the future of our married life."

"I know ; but from your attitude towards me, I have reason to believe that you love me, and if you love me, how can we sanctify that love except by marriage ? "

"There are other means of sanctifying it, Imam ! "

"There may be ; but marriage is certainly the noblest and best of them, and I wish our love to be so sanctified," replied Imam.

"But suppose I am not free to marry you ? "

"Surely you are not married already ! "

"Not in your low earthly sense."

"Can there be marriage in any other sense ? " he demanded.

"Have you never heard of marriage de conscience ? Isn't it nobler and higher than the one in which the priest mumbles out a decayed and useless formula ? "

"But it is the only marriage we know," Imam retorted.

"Because the masses are not capable of understanding anything higher."

"But what is your *marriage de something* ? "

"It is the most perfect, the most holy, and the most binding form of marriage—a marriage which binds the conscience of the parties. Can anything be higher than conscience ? "

"But how is it celebrated ? "

"By the union of hearts, and by the exchange of vows, cut deep upon the conscience. It is the secret sympathy, the silver link, the silken tie, which heart to heart, mind to mind, in body and in soul can

bind ! What other marriage can do that ? ” she asked, keenly feeling the rhythm of the quotation.

“ But have you made such a marriage ? ”

“ I did not say that I had—I only replied to your question.”

“ Stella, I am not a scholar, and your fine thoughts do not appeal to me. I only want you to marry me.”

“ With what object ? ”

“ Oh, just to enjoy ourselves. We shall have children and so perpetuate the race.”

“ If that is all marriage is worth, then let concubinage flourish. Don’t animals mate and produce offspring ? Do they not consort, and, as you put it, enjoy themselves. But are they married, and if not, how are human marriages any higher or different ? ”

“ Stella, if you wish to be learned, why not discuss this question with Professor Labori upstairs ? I am sure he will be able to combat your views—I am a mere shopkeeper. I know nothing about marriage except what I hear from our forebears.”

“ That is why the race is deteriorating, both mentally and physically ! ” she cried. “ Why can’t we produce a Homer, Phidias, a Michael Angelo, or a Shakespeare ? We are going down, till our energies and endeavours are throttled by the multitude, with the shout of huzzas to the Moloch of Progress.”

Imam was confused. He rang up Labori, professor of metaphysics in the University.



## CHAPTER XV

### STELLA AND THE PROFESSOR

STELLA was no philosopher, but she had profited by her experiences. Professor Labori bore a distinguished name, and possessed a fine record of scholarship. He was not merely a book-learned man, he was a thinker as well. He had thought long and deeply on the human problem of marriage, and the relation of the sexes generally. He was a confirmed bachelor, because he had revolted against the current cant about that institution. He could not realize how any man or woman could sacrifice his or her God-given liberty on the altar of marriage. He and Stella had studied the problem from opposite poles, but they had reached the same goal. They were glad to compare notes ; but it was the professor's habit, as, indeed, it is of all pedagogues, that he would take up the standpoint of an adversary, merely for the purpose of raising discussion and clearing the cobwebs from argument.

In the course of the discussion, the Professor told the following story :

“ Well, not many years ago, I came across a very clever student of mine. He read psychology and was a master of metaphysics. His theory of marriage was that, while the proletariat marry as they do, the intellectuals should have a higher

ethical standard of marriage. It was a study in eugenics. Let them marry only for love. Such marriages would be few, but would produce a race of giants—persons with intellectual affinity, one supplementing and completing the other.”

“Well, what next?” Imam interrupted.

“The boy—well, he was a grown-up man, and she was a grown-up woman. They met and fell headlong into love with each other. He married her by the divine law of conscience—marriage de conscience, let us call it. Under the canopy of heaven, in the temple of God, their souls were made one in the presence of the Heavenly Host, and witnessed by the starry firmament. The scent of the roses showered its blessings. She said to him, ‘I love thee.’ He said, ‘I have no love left for another.’ That was a good marriage—as good as any other. Was it not? The man was true to his vow.”

“And the woman?” Stella enquired.

“Well, she changed her mind, and cast her eyes upon another man. He was kind to her; she was kind to him. She said, ‘this man is as good as another, I will take him.’ The man whom she jilted was disconsolate, but she said, ‘Your love is all nonsense. I am a free woman. I do not recognize your marriage in the Temple of God, but my own will’.”

“Did she marry the other man?” asked Stella.

“I don’t know; but she acted as if she had done so.”

“Poor man! What became of the student?”

“He pleaded and prayed to her, but all in vain. She said that she loved him, but only as a friend.”

“What’s the good of that if she refused him the

solace of her society. Couldn't the law compel her to marry him?"

"No, the law could not interfere. It allows a *locus pœnitentia*.

"That is wrong! If a couple were so married, the law should come to the rescue of the jilted husband.

"But it doesn't! Many a man has given his whole life for the sake of his conscience. I do not believe in love marriages now."

"There, Imam, he agrees with you. We must marry and mate, but remove the social scourge attendant upon dissolution. All divorces must be in private, with no names published. If the parties agree to disunite, the judge should record the decree."

"Well, well, I see trouble there too!" The Professor became absent-minded. He sipped his tea and left abruptly.

Stella had declared her love to him, time and again, and in fact had accompanied him to Paris; but unaccountably she had changed her mind. Jaffer had something to do with it, no doubt, so Imam decided to wait; he would not despair.

The next few days passed in feverish anxiety about the coming Id. Jaffer sent Stella a wire to start for London, as he wanted her for the holiday. Imam must come too. Any hesitation she might have been feeling was more than made good by the cable message. Imam was reluctant to leave, for he knew that, so long as Stella was with him, there was some hope. Once she set her eyes upon the old sinner, her fickle mind would begin to oscillate. But he was a nephew and a junior partner—it was his duty to obey!

## CHAPTER XVI

### IMAM'S HOMECOMING

IMAM and Stella flew across to London, and were met by Jaffer, as Rita had gone out for a day's picnic with Tomlins.

He welcomed Stella with a cordiality which shook his entire frame, and she responded by prolonged and repeated handshakes. She clung to Jaffer and kissed him. It was a revelation to Imam, though he had witnessed a like scene before.

"Uncle," he cried, "you and Stella are great friends."

"We are married," replied Jaffer.

"Married! When, where, before whom?"

"Stella will answer those questions for me, if you wish."

"Certainly—she was to have married me, and has given me hope up to the last minute. As we were let down into the aerodrome, she said: 'Imam, don't worry, it will be all right.' Did you not say so, Stella?"

Stella dropped her head and made no answer, but Imam pressed her for a reply.

"I was married to Jaffer in the Temple of God," she muttered. "Our marriage is recorded in the Roll of Eternity; it was witnessed by the heavenly hosts and the starry firmament."

"How could you have married him—Rita is still his wife."

"Yes, but earthly contracts do not count in Heaven. Our union is sealed—it is indissoluble. No man can sunder it."

"What are you going to do with Rita?" demanded Imam, turning to Jaffer.

"She is set free by her own act to-morrow."

"When is she returning?"

"To-morrow, I suppose, but she is in safe company."

Before Rita left, she had made it plain to Jaffer that she would rather not marry him again. Jaffer insisted upon her renewing her mutah for a longer period, or even for life, but she gave the same answer. She was now free, or would be so to-morrow, when Stella would bind her earthly knot. It was unnecessary, but earthly forms have to be observed on earth.

So this was the secret of Stella's sentimentalism. She was going to marry an old man, with one foot in the grave; she, a gay butterfly, was going to flutter against a fading light!

Imam still had hopes that he would be able to persuade Stella not to take the plunge, even if she was not prepared to marry him. But as the appointed time for her marriage drew nearer, she grew more obdurate. Imam, however, could not help making a last appeal to her.

"Stella, you have always protested that you loved me."

"What reason have you to doubt it?" she retorted.

"Then how can you reconcile your love to me with your marriage to my uncle?"

"Love and marriage are two things apart. Love is a feeling, marriage a business."

"But how can that business prosper without love?"

"Fidelity is enough to keep it going!" she replied.

"I've told you, Stella, that I'm no good at arguments! I want you, Stella, I want you!"

He pleaded with all the fervour, with all the passion he could command, but was chagrined to find that Stella did not even discuss the question with him. He would buttonhole Jaffer!

"Uncle," he began, "I have come to discuss a serious business with you."

"I can guess it. Proceed!"

"You know that I have been most miserable in my domestic relations. They have been my life's handicap till I met Rita. I wanted to marry her, but you snatched her away from me—I then thought of Stella. Fortunately I succeeded in impressing her, and we have been in love. She loves me still, but again you stand in the way of my marriage. I want to put it to you—are you acting fairly by your nephew?"

"The unhappiness of your life, Imam, has my deep sympathy, and it is equally my concern. But when I married Rita, I had no knowledge of your intention, and when I married Stella, it was the same. Our marriage is spiritual and pure, but it has to be completed by profane rites. The contract is binding only on her conscience—the choice is hers, not mine."

"Will you say so to Stella in my presence. May I call her?"

"Certainly, if she agrees, but not otherwise."

Stella joined the family conclave, but her face showed no sign of thought or emotion. The silence was getting oppressive when Rita appeared.

"Why are you all so silent?" she demanded, but received no reply. "It is strange—what is this meeting about? Answer me!"

"Ask Imam," replied Jaffer.

"Imam, what is it all about?"

"Ask Stella!" he retorted passionately.

"Stella, dear, what is it?"

"I don't know—I have just been called in."

This was the red rag to Rita, who flew into one of those shrieking hysterical outbursts of temper which had made Jaffer's life so hideous. She said that it was a conspiracy against her, and that she had surprised them. There was still no response; except for this outburst of Rita's, the meeting was motionless. Rita felt exasperated, and tore up her garments. Imam knew that Rita was a determined woman; he had impressed his will power upon her before, and he broke the silence.

"Rita, we had met to discuss a very grave problem, in which you are remotely concerned, but before we could open our lips, you surprised us. I advise you to withdraw from the meeting."

"But why should I withdraw if it concerns me?"

"Only remotely—I request you to withdraw."

"I shan't till I am ordered to do so!" she cried.

"Then take it at that!"

As Imam spoke these stern words, it had the

desired effect. Rita went out, blustering all sorts of pains and penalties to the conspirators.

"Now that the coast is clear," continued Imam, "and there might be another interruption, I will lock the door. As no one will begin, I will—Stella, do you love me?"

"Why do you ask such a silly question?"

"It is a silly question, is it? It concerns my whole life. You loved me and I loved you; I asked you to marry or refuse me. You would neither accept nor refuse. On the other hand, when I was desperate and wanted a final answer, you said that I need not worry, as it would be all right. Now I hear of a different fate."

Stella was dumb. Imam prompted and provoked her to speak, but it was impossible, so he asked Jaffer to intervene. His uncle retorted that his intervention was implied by his presence, and by his silence after Imam had spoken. Imam then hurled his final shot.

"Uncle, as Stella will not speak—nor will you—let me warn you that Stella has again and again declared that she loves me, and I believe it. I leave it to you if you consider it uncle-like, nay fair, to entice my sweetheart and make her your wife. You cannot marry her, for she is equally married to me by the same bond upon which you rely."

This was too much for Stella's self-respect.

"Imam, I have told you again and again that love and marriage are two things apart!" she cried.

"If you love me, you marry me. If you marry me, you love me—that is all I know," he replied quietly. Did you not say, Stella, after I asked you to give me your final reply in the Croydon Aero-



drome, that I need not worry, for it would be all right ? ”

Stella again relapsed into oppressive silence. Imam entreated, cajoled, begged and prayed for one last word to relieve the tension of his mind, but there was no response. It was clear that Stella only spoke when it suited her. She felt herself under no obligation to speak when it suited others that she should do so.

Imam left, leaving Jaffer and Stella alone. Jaffer asked her if she had made such a promise, as was imputed to her by Imam, and she replied that Imam was romancing.

Jaffer felt reassured. He had already parted with Rita, so he put Stella upon her throne. She had become the queen of Jaffer's heart !

## CHAPTER XVII

### IMAM'S REVENGE

STELLA was more considerate to Rita than Rita had ever been to her. She had her revenge, but now that Rita lay prostrate at her feet, she was magnanimous. She treated her with all the courtesy and consideration due to a former mistress of the house.

But Rita's vanity had been touched to the quick ; she was beaten, but there was no surrender.

Imam knew that Rita had made herself a thorn in Jaffer's side ; he knew her spiteful nature, and her intense hatred and jealousy of Stella, now many times increased by her marriage. Imam had always cherished a lurking regard for Rita, and he regarded it as a reflection upon the family honour if she went out of the family. Moreover, she had money, and was in possession of the valuable pearl necklace which Jaffer had presented to her in his dotage.

Something like love of Rita, but a great deal more powerful than love-hatred of Stella, on account of her treachery in jilting him at the last moment, conjoined to expediency, were decisive of Imam's determination. He would approach Rita again, and marry her by mutah if possible, but marry her in any case.

It is easy for a man to resolve upon marriage ;

but its fulfilment is in other hands. Imam had taken for granted that Rita was of the same mind, and had quite forgotten that a woman's mind is more changeable than a weather-cock.

He went into her apartments, where she was to continue as long as she liked as Mr. and Mrs. Jaffer's guest.

"Rita," he began, "you have seen the worst. Stella has married Jaffer."

"And jilted you !"

Imam pretended not to have heard Rita's interjection.

"What are you going to do ?" he asked.

"I have lots to do if I wish, but I am sick of the world. I want to retire into obscurity and take my rest."

"Don't be so despondent, Rita—you are still young and good-looking. You must have lots of admirers."

"Admirers do not make for happiness. They are a source of embarrassment."

"But a woman without admirers is meat without salt ! What would life be without love, and how can there be love without admirers ?"

"Well, I have had them to satiety, and I am getting nearer to the varieties of life."

"Rita, may I ask you a question ?"

"What is it ?"

"Are you under obligation to marry any one ?"

"There is no obligation whatever !" she replied.

Imam had put a wrong question, to which he got a correct reply. Rita was certainly under no obligation to anyone, but her desire was her own.

"Then if you are under no obligation, will you incur one now?"

"It all depends, Imam."

"Well, Rita, you know that I proposed to you last year and you accepted me. But you married Jaffer."

Imam had put his foot down upon Rita's tender corn. A woman will never confess her fault.

"You are giving a garbled account of the affair, Imam," she retorted. "I accepted no one except the man I married, and I had not even accepted him!"

"Well, then, Rita, we will start with a clean slate now. Let me put it to you—I love you, and want you to marry me!"

"No, Imam, I have dismissed marriage from my mind. I am going into a hermitage."

"Don't speak those words of despair, Rita! Do you feel that you have become a back number? But indeed, you are not."

Imam could not decide whether Rita was in a jilting mood, or whether she was playing. He tried to prove her by exhausting the usual arts and vocabulary of the lover. All he could gather was that Rita was impervious alike to argument and reason. Still, she fed him on hopes, and would not say a straight "yes" or "no."

It was, however, plain that she was carrying on an internal struggle with herself. On the one hand, she was consumed by jealousy of Stella and would like to subjugate her, but on the other hand, she did not know how to do so! Marrying Imam would not serve that purpose, but would accentuate her inferiority, since Imam was a nephew and a junior

partner, and she would be treated correspondingly in Jaffer's household. She would like to discuss the matter with some one upon whose judgment she could rely. Imam was, of course, out of the question—besides being personally interested, he was not a qualified casuist. She might try Tomlins, but he, also, was interested in his own way. She could, of course, trust no woman's judgment on a question of such delicacy. All things considered, she decided to try Tomlins.

She telephoned to him, and he arrived with a fair companion, whom he left to wait in an adjoining café.

"Tomlins, I have summoned you to remove a great perplexity that is worrying me," Rita remarked.

"I thought you had outlived your worries."

"Oh, no, it is this—Imam insists upon my marrying him, but I don't want to be Stella's junior. What shall I do?"

"Then don't marry!"

"But I want to marry."

"Then do so!" he answered, laughing.

"Tomlins, you are merciless. Why can't you think it out and give me good advice. Are you in a hurry?"

"Yes, I left a party waiting for me, so I must go."

"When can you come back to advise me at leisure? I am terribly worried."

"I'm no good at advice," he answered her.

"But I will make an appointment on the 'phone. Meanwhile, can you let me have that cheque?"

"Tomlins, you are so mercenary, and think only of your cheque while I am dying with anxiety."

“ Well, I must go, so will you let me have that cheque ? ”

Rita knew that it was useless to argue with him. He was short of funds, and wanted five hundred to settle his debts. No one would lend money to an impecunious mechanic, so he was fleecing Rita, feeding her on hopes which added to her suffering. She gave him the cheque.

As Tomlins was busy with the lady in the café, expending his ill-gotten gains, he forgot all about the promise he had casually made to Rita, who kept near the telephone, expecting a message at any moment. She waited and waited, till she could wait no more, and so rang up his number, only to learn that Tomlins had left London ! How stupid she was—she had forgotten to ask when he was expected, and had not left any message for delivery to him. She rang up the same number again, and received the information that Tomlins had left no instructions, as to the date or hour of his return ; but the message was taken down to be delivered to him, if and when he returned.

Rita could not wait indefinitely ; what she really wanted was Imam's money and Tomlin's hand. What Imam wanted was Stella's hand and Jaffer's throat. They were working at cross purposes.

Stella's marriage to Jaffer proved to be his talisman. She was a woman of the world, and used to society. She was immaculate in her conduct towards him, nursed and fed him, had him treated for his cough, so that at the end of the year he looked ten years younger.

At that rate, the couple had long years of happy married life before them, and Imam was impatient.

Stella had already turned the proverbial age after which marriage is an indiscretion, and Imam was no lover of old maids. He knew that he was the head and brains of Jaffer & Co., and also knew well that that business hung by a single thread—all such businesses did ! There is scarcely any business so speculative as that of the pearl merchant. Gambling at the tables at Monte Carlo is by comparison a safer venture. Imam could crush that business by a single deal, and he knew too well his uncle's susceptibilities. He would rather commit suicide than face bankruptcy.

Jaffer had crossed him in love, and Imam felt that everything was fair in love and war. But, in ruining Jaffer, he would ruin himself. Moreover, Imam had been brought up like Jaffer's own son, and could not betray him in his old age. But he was justified in withdrawing his co-operation, so took his share and separated.

His departure removed the single prop which held up the firm—it came down with a crash, like the walls of Jericho. Within a few days, the manager made a deal which overwhelmed Jaffer. He had gone to sleep a millionaire, but woke up a broken man. His affairs were in bankruptcy !

Imam had been after Jaffer's throat ; now he was after Stella. She was a fair-weather companion, and so long as Jaffer's affairs were prosperous, she made an ideal wife. But now he was a disreputable bankrupt, and his name was anathema upon every lip. His friends avoided him ; his enemies chuckled.

Stella was receiving her share of the unpleasantness, and she was a sensitive woman, highly sus-

ceptible to her surroundings. Jaffer had fixed her dower at ten thousand pounds, and she wanted to save it from the wreckage.

Imam heard of her misery, though she was ashamed to face her former lover. With what face could she meet him, with what excuses condone her crime? But Imam was a generous man, and as soon as she saw him, she burst into tears.

"Imam, I have deceived you!"

"No, you have not, Stella—you stuck to your promise. I admire you all the more to-day."

Reconciliation was easy. The affairs of Jaffer & Co. were patched up by Imam. He then married Stella, who became the principal jewel of his firm.



## CHAPTER XVIII

### RITA AND IMAM

MEANWHILE Rita had watched the events from a safe distance. When she saw the crash come, her heart rejoiced. She met Imam, and told him that if he renewed his suit, she would give an answer.

Imam's thoughts ran to those saddest of all words—"Too late." Rita knew it. She too had felt the effect of those commonest of all mistakes. Tomlins had been pumping her dry, feeding her on false hopes, and giving a roseate view of the millionaire days in sight for him. He had invented a piece of mechanism which was to revolutionize the world of transport ! That revolution never came.

Meanwhile, Rita ran through her small fortune, financing the invention, and was herself reduced to penury. She had lost Tomlins and also her money. She recalled the fate which Ibu Sayyid had promised for her. It had come too true ! Like Stella, she was thrown upon the streets, penniless and friendless. In her better days, she had exchanged some lukewarm correspondence with Stella, who had offered her the standing hospitality of her home. But Rita was too proud to accept it.

"Fancy, that woman whom I have brought up and put into that place is now trying to patronize me. I would rather live on a beggar's crust than

see her face or cross her threshold. The sight of her will unhinge my mind, her presence will break my heart. I should have been in her place to-day, if I had only accepted Jaffer, but Tomlins would not let me do it. And where is Tomlins now ? ”

The old woman, for she was now old, cried as she passed the events of her life through her mind, and at every stage there occurred to her those most abused of all words—“ Too late.”

Rita's condition was now one of abject helplessness and penury. She remembered the money which she had cabled to Stella when she was stranded. If she requested the return of her loan, that would not be *infra dig*. But what dignity had she left now, and how long would that amount keep her afloat ? But it was something—it would save her dignity for a little while. So she wrote :

“ MY DEAR STELLA,

It is a long time since I have heard from you, and longer still since we met. How are you, my dear. I am only so-so. I was thinking that if you could, at your convenience, refund the twenty-five pounds, it would help. I am on the rocks and hope that this sum may keep the wolf from the door for a while, though my struggle with him is an uneven one. May God bless you.

Your ever unfortunate,  
RITA.”

Stella was moved by Rita's letter. It was like a woman who had lost her all, trying to wrap her dignity in a shawl.

“ MY DEAREST RITA (she wrote),

I have just received your loving note and read it with great pain. Why, Rita, you are certainly entitled to your money back, with compound interest. My thanks for your timely help are still overdue and can never be paid. We have a large house, and renew our heartiest welcome to it.

Believe me,

Ever yours affectionately,

STELLA.”

Rita tore open the envelope and read the note—she was not glad, but rather downhearted. She had not lent the money, but had given it, and should never have mentioned it. But she could not beg ! Still she did not want the five hundred pounds that Stella sent. She was only entitled to twenty-five, which she would take and remit the balance.

Rita was too proud to sponge on Stella, of whom she was jealous ; she was too ashamed to face Imam, whom she had wronged. She was too proud to beg, for with all her faults, she had never sunk so low. She could not live under Imam’s roof, for while her body might live, her soul had already been crushed, and the memory of other days would rip open an old sore and produce a mental agony which she could not endure. Her days were over—she must go !

Rita paid her bills, removed the few trinkets from her person, presented them to her landlady, tore open her locket, in which she had worn the portrait of an unknown man ; kissed it again and again, and consigned it to the flames, exclaiming, “Till

we meet again !” She wrote a letter to Stella, another to Imam, and a third one to Himm, asking each the grace of forgiveness for her wrongs. Then she rang for her landlady.

“ Mrs. Parker,” she said, in a voice choked with emotion, “ you have been very kind to me, though I have been testy at times. Forgive me, and *au revoir* till we meet again.”

## CHAPTER XIX

### STELLA RESCUES RITA

As Rita said good-bye to Mrs. Parker, the landlady lost no time in gauging what was passing through her mind. She ran to the telephone and informed Stella that Rita was looking queer, and that she was afraid she was not right in her mind. The last adieu she had written to Stella completed her message.

Stella immediately ordered her car and drove straight to Mrs. Parker's apartments. She rang for the old lady, who informed her that Rita had just left, and could not have gone far.

Stella turned the car, overtook her onetime friend, kissed Rita, and forced her into the car and brought her home. She had always been keenly responsive to kindness in every form, and had not forgotten the money which Rita had wired her when she was penniless.

Rita was now prostrate, and Stella's warm heart throbbed in sympathy for her misfortune. She begged her to take rest till she was able to map out her future. Rita was still too proud to accept hospitality in the home of one whose offer she had refused. But the change of environment weakened her will, and she yielded to the pressure of Stella's persuasion.

Imam was absent in Paris, and would not return for several weeks. Rita decided that she would stay till Imam returned—it was too early to peer into the future. Stella was naturally a happy-hearted woman ; she was out to enjoy life, and she infected Rita with her own cheery disposition.

The two old friends became inseparable, but Imam arrived unexpectedly one night and found Rita in his spare room.

Stella told him of Rita's desperate resolve, which she had succeeded in combating, and asked Imam to be kind to her. The advice was unnecessary, as Imam had always a soft corner in his heart for the woman he had once loved, and whom he loved still.

He had a quiet chat with Rita, in which the two cleared up their mutual misunderstandings, and put Rita at her ease. It was decided that Imam was to take her to Paris for a change. Rita asked Stella to accompany them, but she pleaded weighty excuses, and let Rita go alone.

Imam and Rita were together in Paris, where they stayed for six weeks. They then returned to London, where Stella welcomed Rita, and congratulated her upon her looks, "made in Paris." Rita felt flattered. She had once more secured an assured position, and it did not take her long to obtain a place in Imam's affections.

He told Stella of his increasing interest in her guest, but instead of resenting his philandering, Stella became his active abettor. Rita was blunt, and her weapon was a bludgeon ; Stella was subtle—she was a woman of the world. She never used harsh expressions when condemning her rival, but,

like the savage, she hurled elegant arrows, ornamented with peacock feathers, but with poisoned tips.

Stella said to herself : " Imam is my husband. If it pleases him to toy with Rita, why should I not let him add to his pleasure. If he knows that I study his pleasures, and make them mine, I shall find him love me all the more as his whole-hearted companion. If, on the other hand, I resent his flirtation, he will grow secretive and distrustful of me. Which is better—a husband who trusts me, or one who shuns me as a spy. As for Rita, if she regains his love, she can never regain his confidence. He would always prize me above her, as one who was prepared to identify herself with his happiness."

Stella was right; the more Imam flirted with Rita, the more Stella seemed pleased. She could at least disguise her chagrin, so as to give it the appearance of outward satisfaction.

Stella knew how to touch the tender chord of Imam's vanity. She was determined to efface any consciousness of herself in ministering to his pleasure. She felt a glow of responsive happiness in his growing confidence in her. He had nothing to conceal from her, and she was like a playmate in all his moods. Deliberately she proposed mutah with Rita. Her self-effacement secured for her a niche in Imam's heart which no woman could capture by storm. He was a slow convert, and at first he could not bring himself to believe that there could exist a woman who would suggest a course so pleasing to her husband, but so inimical to her own interest. He asked her, how could she, a woman and his wife, suggest such a course? Was it in mockery, or was it to provide an outlet for some

plot which she had been hatching against him. He was too human to credit the exalted virtue of a wife whose ideal of friendship was above the range of the social moralist.

But the moment Rita was wedded, she became her old self again, and her dominating passion to lord it over Stella returned. She thought that if Imam loved her, he had no business to love Stella, and that if she could eject her from the home, she would have Imam all to herself. There was then a chance of perpetuating her temporary marriage.

She told Imam all Stella's past, laying thick the colour upon the dark patches of her life. Imam began to feel that Stella was, after all, a foreigner and was playing a game.

His demeanour towards her underwent a sudden change—Rita was now all in all to him. But Stella showed no sign of retaliation; she was more amused than amazed at her husband's vagaries. She loved Imam the more as his love towards her diminished, and began to treat Imam as a naughty child, who had only to be humoured to make him good.

This added fuel to Rita's jealousy.

Stella used to hold her periodical receptions, at which Imam's friends were sumptuously entertained. Rita began to pass hints to Imam, that Stella had a motive in securing a concourse of nobodies. She was accused of being an accomplished coquette, while her imagined flirtations were held up to Imam's ridicule.

Imam was an unsophisticated fellow, who had risen by the power of his specialised business capacity. In his own field, he was invincible, but in other fields he was a child, and he was no match



for Rita's machinations. Scandal had been the salt of Rita's life. She could not endure it without its daily consumption.

Imam had been ten years in Europe, and was feeling home-sick. He thirsted for the blue skies of Ind; its sunshine and space. Rita was aware of his yearning, and urged him to return, if only for a time, to the gorgeous East. Personally, Stella saw no sense in revisiting a land whose stolid immutability had remained untouched by ages. She was a modern woman, and delighted in the constant changes of fashions, and the manners of Mayfair. To her, the picturesqueness of the East was reminiscent of those immemorial customs which were out of accord with her own notion of human progress.

But Stella was a consummate diplomat; whatever her own views, she possessed enough elasticity of mind to enter into her husband's thoughts of the land he loved, and which he was naturally anxious to revisit. So when Imam sounded her about his projected return to his motherland, Stella seconded him, adding that it would be a change which she should relish.

Rita's thoughts flew in another direction. Tomlins had become erratic in his correspondence, and she was anxious to beard that lion in his own den. Also she wanted to take it out of Himm, whom she had deserted several decades ago. She had heard of his attachment to Stella, and she was curious to see if she had added to his life a different matrimonial flavour.

The trio took one of those floating palaces which link the East with the West in their weekly cruises.

Rita had decided to spring a pleasant surprise upon Tomlins, but had equally decided to give a wide berth to Himm !

Stella, on the other hand, was anxious to meet Himm and his inamorata, about whom Himm had been raving in his correspondence. Imam had not met Himm, and was more anxious to revisit his native heath and disport his pearls to the octogenarians who had whitened their beards in the slumber and sunshine of vijaynagar.

The party landed in Bombay. The monsoon had just finished refreshing and reviving nature. India was now on the threshold of winter—the winter which brings in its train the cool wind and the talisman of Arcady.

Stella suggested that she would like to pay a visit to the haunts of other days, and Imam was game. He was anxious to relapse into his pristine orthodoxy, and would rather be alone with his own people. Rita was anxious to study the arcana of tea rollers—she would go to Danipur, where Tomlins was employed. The three separated, and Rita had the surprise of her life.

She reached Danipur in the small hours of the morning, and made for the "Crow's Nest" where her quondam admirer lived. The "Crow's Nest" was asleep. Rita knocked at the door, but her knocks were unheard—though her stentorian voice was recognised by a sleepy man who peered out of a small window.

"Is that you, Rita?" he asked. "What a surprise. What has brought you here at this hour of the night?"

Rita was startled to see the grimy, swarthy face

of Tomlins addressing her. But she had deserved it, for Tomlins had had a long night duty, and had just turned in for the recess. He, however, put on the first garment on which he could lay his hand and let in Rita. An hour later, the sleepers awoke, and Tomlins introduced Rita to his wife and a houseful of children.

Rita's face was a study, for Tomlins had always professed to be a bachelor. It now turned out that he had long been married, and had reared a grown-up family.

Tomlins heard from Rita all about her life. She was amazed at Tomlins' humble dwelling, and the lowly position he occupied in a place where she had depicted him to be an opulent Goliath. How was she going to spend a week in a subordinate's overcrowded quarters—but it was Hobson's choice, and she was left no alternative.

She was allotted a bed in Mrs. Tomlins' verandah, where she made herself as comfortable as she could, by making her hostess most uncomfortable. She learnt from Mrs. Tomlins all she cared to know about the man's biography.

"Our life is a hard one," explained Mrs. Tomlins. "My husband gets three hundred rupees, out of which he spends half in drink. He is hounded by creditors, and has not the means even to put his children to school."

Rita could see all that for herself, for scarcely had the sun risen, when a crowd of clamorous creditors besieged his barrack. The dhobie was demanding his dues, the baker his bill, the butcher would not serve one ounce of meat till his twelve months' supplies were paid for.

The cook had already struck work, and Mrs. Tomlins had to officiate in his place. She was a cranky woman who did not relish the duty of having to cook for an extra person. But, fortunately for the Tomlins, Rita was a godsend. He asked her to cook, and she put the Tomlins in funds, and eased the brow of Mrs. Tomlins, which was becoming scowled by the sight of a deserted larder.

Tomlins was hoping to provide himself with a new suit, and gave Rita news of his approaching birthday. It was true that his real birthday was yet far off, but who would not have a birthday every day if it heralded a new suit!

Rita's allotted week passed in providing for the creature comforts of Tomlins and the family. He promised to escort Rita downhill on her return, and this gave her the needed opportunity to have a quiet chat with him.

"Tomlins, you have grossly deceived me. You always protested that you were single, and now I find you a paterfamilias, with a large family."

"Rita, I am not a man to deceive—you have deceived me in the past, and are deceiving me now."

There was menace in Tomlins' tone, the significance of which was not lost upon Rita. During her enforced visit, Tomlins had been unremittingly passing hints about his poverty and his indebtedness, which he ascribed to Rita's sudden desertion. He confessed that he had married, but it was a mechanical union, which rested upon nothing more substantial than convenience and convention. He wanted to leave it all and settle down at Bath.

His persuasive eloquence half deceived Rita. She gave him a cheque in which she signed away

much of her fortune, and she swallowed as gospel truth all his palpable falsehoods.

Rita was no fool, but she could not help it when her judgment was clouded by passion. The end of her marriage to Imam was approaching, and though he might renew it, she knew that it was now or never so far as regards Tomlins, if she wished to secure the prize on which she had set her heart.

Tomlins escorted her to the junction station of Sointilla, and promised to rejoin her after winding up his Indian affairs. She took a passionate farewell of a lover who commanded her respect, and in whom she had always reposed unabated confidence.

Amongst her old cronies, Rita had placed Tomlins and Pantaloo in the forefront. Tomlins had been visited—there remained Pantaloo. But his whereabouts were unknown, and Rita did not know what to do. Consequently, she inserted a short notice in the agony columns of the *Daily Screecher* :

“*Wanted* the whereabouts of Mr. Pantaloo of Malabar. Anyone giving information leading to his discovery will be handsomely rewarded.—RITA.”

Rita had always suffered from the delusion that there was only one Pantaloo in the Universe. She had still to learn that there was a tribe of them ! Such was the impression produced in her mind by the scores of Pantalooos who competed for the proffered prize. They came from all strata of society—some were barristers, some doctors, others schoolmasters; while Rita had the choice of a pleader’s attorney, a greengrocer, and even an undertaker. She was not quite sure if her own Pantaloo had not

got mixed up with her numerous applicants. If so, she was unable to spot him. She gave up the quest, and was returning to Desouza—her next admirer on the list, to whom Tomlins had introduced her in England—when she received a wire from the real Pantaloo, who was now sojourning in the far Cochin, maintaining the accounts of a coffee planter.

Rita had to choose between Desouza and Pantaloo. Not being able to make up her mind, she wired back to Pantaloo to meet her at Cawnpur, where Desouza was maintaining a refreshment stall and a European tavern.

It was a far cry from Cochin to Cawnpur, and Pantaloo was habitually a cautious man. He was not prepared to take any risk, so wired to Rita for five hundred rupees to enable him to complete his journey. This amount was, of course, excessive, but it was a feeler and served its purpose. He was the recipient of a telegraphic remittance !

Pantaloo then paused while he decided whether he should keep the money and cut Rita. He had had enough of her !

But his cupidity at last got the better of him, and he took from his master a ten days' casual leave to visit a "sick relative."

Rita was certainly his relative in a sense, but she was not "sick," yet it was the time-hallowed pretence for taking leave in India, and Pantaloo was an Indian up to his finger-tips. He told his wife that he was going out on his master's business, to popularise coffee in Hindustan, where its aroma had not penetrated.

He met Rita at the Desouzas'—a broken-down,

dilapidated Madrasi—the very antithesis of the Pantaloo of fifteen years ago, whom Rita had adored, and a mere apology of the Pantaloo of Rita's school-days to whom she had surrendered her charms.

She was sorry that she had sent for him, but Pantaloo had not risked that journey for nothing. He told her that he had lost his job on her account. His employer, a hard task-master, would not place him on leave, so he had to resign his job for her sake, as he could not bear to let her return home without embracing her as of yore.

Rita, however, affected aloofness and dismissed him with only a thousand rupees, which Pantaloo thought mean of her.

He said as much to Mr. Desouza, to whom he confided his youthful liaison with her.

"Now she has married a Nawab, and I am old and poor, so she has discarded me. Well, well, God is great. He will yet punish her for her infidelity."

Mr. Desouza was a sympathetic man, and soothed his aching heart by a copious draught of rum.

Pantaloo thereupon sang songs in Tamil, and threatened to elope with Rita, whom he had always loved. It led to a public scene, which Rita settled by grimaces and shouting.

The scene closed with the tavern for the night. Mr. Desouza congratulated Rita for her heroic defence of her lover. He admired her pluck and bravery, which had put to rout all the drunken hooligans of the factory.

Next morning, when Mr. Desouza was more sober, he realised that his tavern had been the scene of a scandalous riot. But he did not realise that he was himself in a measure responsible for it. Never-

theless, he wanted to make amends to all concerned, so he invited them to a free bout. The revellers of the previous night were reconciled, and all joined in drinking the health of "Desouza the Great," and "Rita the Good."

The frivolous company of the Desouzases seemed to soothe Rita's shattered nerves. She almost forgot the shocks she had received from Tomlins and Pantaloo. She drowned her sorrow in the drinking bouts, over which she was made to preside. Desouza reaped a rich harvest from her presence, for Rita opened her floodgates of generosity to the motley set, who admired her beauty and applauded her goodness.

Rita had had many admirers before ; but she had never received such a unanimous testimony from the representatives of all nationalities, and the select jewels of every profession. She wrote to Imam of the good time she was enjoying and the madness of all Cawnpur in going into hysterics about her beauty and goodness. She hinted to Imam that she had not received her deserts from him.

Imam wrote back to her, saying that since he had put his foot upon his native heath, he had taken to religious practices ; he was now an orthodox pious Mussulman, and spent most of his time saying his prayers and turning his rosary.

Imam had turned over a new leaf. When he was in Europe he had taken to European ways. He wanted show-wives for his house-parties, and he felt the necessity of extending his clientèle by giving them costly entertainments which would have been incomplete without the adornment of his ladies.



He had married Stella, but his European customers saw no novelty in her. He had, therefore, to marry Rita, who, being of Indian blood, aroused their curiosity and riveted their interest. She was a valuable business asset to him, and he had now made his pile. He had received a tempting offer from a Parisian syndicate to take over his business.

Having lived away from home for the best years of his life, he was not quite sure if he could become re-acclimatized to India. He had, therefore, decided to give it a trial. His return home had brought round him all his relations and friends, and he felt more happy in their familiar environment. He had cabled his acceptance of the syndicate's offer, and as he was closing down his business, he had no reason to go out of his harem for female society. He would not strictly live by the Koran, and taboo all western trappings. As a Mohammedan he was free to divorce any of his wives, but while Rita's mutah needed no divorce, he was thinking whether he should not restore Stella once more to her liberty.

He had not yet conveyed his thoughts either to Stella or to Rita, but was seeking a favourable opportunity to do so.

The fourth of August was Rita's birthday, and the habitués of the salon knew it. For weeks before, they had been planning a rousing celebration of the anniversary.

Rita had encouraged them to look forward to that day, and its arrival was heralded by a dinner and a dance. The taps of Desouza's wines were allowed to flow, from which the workshop hands drank to their fill. Several of them proposed to

Rita a moonlight drive in a car belonging to the foreman, Mr. Albert Smith, who drove the company along the Esplanade. His spirits had risen under the exhilarating air of the August moon, and he proposed a serenade. The party of four, including Rita, followed Mr. Smith's unerring lead to the river-bank, where a raft was held, tied up to the roots of a tree.

Mr. Smith brought down the cushions from his Ford, and flung them into the raft for Rita and the rest to sit on. The moonlight serenaders now started for mid-stream, to the accompaniment of their maudlin songs, adapted for the occasion.

As they reached the swift current, Mr. Smith gave a start, for he found that the strings to which the raft was tied, with a low margin of security, had given way. Rita and her companion had parted from them, and were being carried down by the raging current. They thought it was fine fun, but the two soon became lost to view.

Smith had sense enough to swerve his boat lengthwise in order to dodge the eddy, but the presence of imminent danger made them forgetful of their duty to their companions. They made for the shore, which they narrowly escaped missing. In their hurry to get on to the dry bank, they took a leap which landed them in six feet of muddy water.

Smith was, however, a good swimmer, and had the presence of mind to throw off his coat and swim for the bank, but his mind was addled, and his legs were caught by what seemed to be the roots of the ghastly peepul.

He yelled for help, and the shouts of the drowning

man reached the ears of the boatmen, who were cosily sleeping in their huts in the guava grove on the Bund. They ran down, and found Smith floundering in the mud. The watermen seized a rope which lay coiled to the peepul tree, and let it down. One of them jumped into the swirling eddy and towed Mr. Smith safely to the shore.

"Were you alone, sahib?" he asked.

"No!" jerked out Mr. Smith. "There were three more and a lady. Find them."

"Which way have they gone?" the man asked.

"Down stream," was all Mr. Smith knew.

"Then they cannot be found," answered the boatman.

Mr. Smith explained to the ferrymen about the misadventure, and asked if there was any chance for the other unfortunates to escape with their lives.

"None, sahib, none," asseverated all the four boatmen.

"The river is full of crocodiles, and no one in their predicament can escape. I have," added Mangal, the head man, "risked my own life to save yours. It is only a chance that both of us are alive now, as the crocodiles smell human flesh and dart for it wherever they may be. Why did you not call to us, if you wanted to go out for a cruise?"

"How could I know that you were there?"

"Why, we have to be near our boats, as the river is in full flood and our boats might be washed away."

Smith was in no mood to discuss the details, but told the boatmen to call for their baksheesh the next morning. It was clear that his companions had disappeared. He turned his Ford and went back

to his quarters, dried himself, and then settled down to sleep.

Next morning, Mangal and his fellow watermen, and their creditor, Dholak Ram, waited upon Mr. Smith, who gave the assembly five rupees.

"But what about the boats, mortgaged to me by these men for fifty rupees? Who will pay that sum?" demanded Ram.

The fishermen corroborated Dholak Ram. They held Mr. Smith liable for the loss of the boats since he had no right to untie them from their moorings.

Smith disclaimed all responsibility in the matter, which aroused a clamour for the settlement of their claim, in the midst of which everybody forgot to think any more about the rest of the party. Mr. Smith assured the riotous crowd that he had had nothing to do with the untying of the wretched raft.

This was the last heard of the boat and its other occupants.

Desouza took possession of all Rita's belongings, for he claimed to be entitled to them in payment of his numerous bills. It was the end of poor Rita, for it was only too obvious that she, who had before sought a watery grave, had found it unexpectedly in the midst of her moonlight excursion.

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## CHAPTER XX

### STELLA REVISITS OLD CRONIES

ON landing in Bombay, Stella had made a bee-line for Khichdipur, where she met Himm at last. The sight brought back to her mind the memories of their early days.

Stella fell upon Himm's neck, as if moved by an uncontrollable impulse. Himm did not know how to welcome her, though his pleasure at meeting her, after these long years, was boundless. He kissed her and evinced in his acts and talk an extravagance which greatly startled and puzzled the mixed company by which he was then surrounded. Stella and Himm had been old friends, and though they had loved each other, neither had reached the height of passion which had tied Himm to Shahinda. There are degrees in love, as well as quality.

Stella was anxious to meet her mother and sister, whom she had left for a world tour with an unknown Count. They were now stationed in Gulshanbagh, a town which enjoyed the climate of the Riviera in winter and of Tierra del Fuego in summer. Himm told Stella that Shahinda was also there, enjoying a short repose after her arduous duties in the plains. Stella looked forward to meeting her, for Himm's sake; but of course she was risking that

journey to meet her own relations. She had, however, left before Stella or Himm could meet her.

Himm had wired to the Kachas, about their approaching visit. The Kachas were both surprised and pleased at their agreeable intrusion. They met them at the station, and lodged them in a house which they had rented for the purpose, and which became the rendezvous for the old friends who daily gathered round the festive board of Stella, to enjoy her jovial company.

But the round of visits and return visits were soon over, and the social circle began to suffer from the ennui which comes of surfeit. Stella was the first to feel the boredom of an uneventful living. She questioned Mummy for fresh possible avenues of relief from her oppressive monotony, and asked what had become of Beti.

She was assured that Beti had married a prosperous landlord, who had taken her into the interior, denuded her of all her civic trappings, and that she had relapsed into nameless obscurity and was the mother of several children.

Stella was surprised. How could a high-spirited hoyden sink into a dismal den of primeval rusticity? How could she rest content by imprisoning her soul in an airless dungeon, unheard of and unseen by her admiring legion?

"Mummy, have you ever met Beti since she married?"

"No, darling, she has now taken to caste and purdah. She is forbidden to expose her little finger to the sight of man, while her caste forbids intercourse with us or our kind."

"Mummy, it seems a wild exaggeration—I should like to see her. Where does she live?"

"Seven marches from here, cross country."

Stella was out for an adventure—there flowed the blood of a Shikari in her veins. If she had been born a man, she would have been lion-hunting in Bechuanaland. She asked Himm to accompany her to Beti's village, but he tried to change the topic.

But Stella had seen her mother and her people; she had stipulated for four months' sojourn in India. She had plenty of leisure. Moreover, she had seen India, but very little of her people. Here was a chance to see them in their native haunts. Himm reluctantly accompanied her.

A country lumber cart, used by the people from the days of the Pharaohs, was requisitioned. It was drawn by a pair of bullocks. It was provided with a bamboo shelter, while a straw litter served to deaden its bone-shaking jerks.

Stella spread a cotton carpet on the straw and squatted like Buddha in contemplation, ready to start. Himm took a back seat, dangling his legs from the cross-piece.

The cart went from padao to padao—the resting places for bullock-carts about fifteen miles apart.

Stella had scarcely been in the cart for a couple of hours when she began to complain of a queer feeling in her back. She had had a camel ride at Suez, but it was not a patch on the bandy cart for exercising her body. Two more hours, and she complained of backache, which Himm, as her companion, had to rule down.

The cart-man was giving sidelong glances at the lady, trying all possible postures to bring her frame

into rhythm with the erratic tiltings of his equipage. He was an old cart-man and knew !

He told Himm to lay the mem sahib prostrate on her back, in the centre of the cart, which he did ; but then where was Himm to go ? The man suggested his walking alongside the cart, as a little exercise would do him good. He took the advice, though it did him no good. It is true that he had been a great walker, but the advent of the motor-car, and his own sedentary pursuits, had slackened his muscles.

Stella was now tolerably comfortable, and gave vent to her accustomed volubility.

"Are you tired, Himm ? I know you're a champion mountaineer."

"But there are no mountains here," he replied.

Himm reached the first stage, and lost no time in engaging another cart, and thus they jogged on till they reached the second padao, when the wheel of Stella's bandy gave way.

The cart-man was not surprised. In fact, he was surprised that the cart had not broken down before. Himm got out to engage a third cart; but he could not secure one for love or money. A happy idea struck him ! He would drive the cart, and make the man take his place alongside.

The idea was a brilliant one, but failed in execution. The bullocks had kept to the ruts when Jhiblu was sitting behind, prodding them with his toes, but they missed that stimulus and commenced pulling the cart from side to side.

The country yokel advised Himm to twist their tails, but while he twisted the tail on the right, the cart went down a khud and turned turtle.



Stella screamed, but Himm pulled her out of her litter, while Jhiblu swore at the bullocks.

“ May your master die of a serpent bite ! ”

He unyoked the bullocks, straightened out the cart, with the help of Himm, and restarted.

The next padao was eight miles ahead. Stella had been badly shaken, but luckily was unhurt, as the straw had protected her from damage. She decided to walk the distance, which she did.

At the next padao, Himm went in search of another cart. But such carts as there were proved more ramshackle than Jhiblu's, so it was agreed that the cart should carry the luggage, while Himm and Stella mounted two ponies, which were for hire.

This was just as well, as the track ahead was scarcely traceable. It was overgrown with weeds, and scattered with pebbles. The party, however, moved on, till they reached a wayside hamlet, where Himm called in the Malguzar and questioned him closely as to his bearings.

The villager informed them that the rest of the journey would be even more trying, and that they had better change into a palki, which he improvised out of a small string cot, to which two bamboo poles were tied, and six sturdy hamels engaged to carry them.

It was quite a novel experience for Stella, and she swore that it was preferable to a motor-car, provided that time was no object. The hamels carried their load to the accompaniment of a plaintive monologue, which eased their burden. The caravan was ten days on the march, when the curling smoke from a cluster of palmyras gave them the welcome signal of the end of their destination.

Himm thought it prudent to stop the procession on the bank of the rivulet. He offered to play the herald and announce to the sacred village the presence of a European lady. He enquired about the house of Beti, but no one knew any person by that name. He then adopted the language of circumlocution.

Was not a girl from Khichdipur married there? She was, but her name was Malti.

Himm had forgotten that Indian girls change their name upon their marriage, for his European habits had made him a stranger to his own people.

He announced himself to Malti's husband, a middle-aged clout, who eyed him with ill-disguised suspicion, till Himm assured him of his identity. He was then welcomed with low salaams, and improvised excuses. A large party of quidnuncs had already gathered, and these marched ahead of Himm to welcome Stella.

They were lodged in a house the occupant of which was turned out for the nonce to make room for the honourable strangers. News was sent to Beti to prepare herself to receive her honoured guests.

The sun was now setting, and Beti's husband suggested that the guests should take rest for the night and interview Beti the next morning. The visitors were given vegetable food, which Stella greatly relished.

Next morning, Stella reminded Himm of the appointed interview. A palki hove in sight, like the one which had concluded Stella's journey. It was brought slowly to a standstill, and its occupant was let down, though guarded from the evil eye of men by the dhotis, to observe the purdah. A

figure emerged from the packing-case, bedizened in a multi-coloured sari, and loaded with gold and silver ornaments from head to foot.

"Bet! How thou art changed!" cried Stella.

Beti gave a grin for answer. She could not speak lest men might overhear her, but she broke her silence in a slow whisper.

"How are you, Stella?" With these words, Beti broke down in a torrent of tears.

"Bet, Bet, how can you like this life?"

"I am quite happy—I am used to it now."

Stella could not believe her eyes. She could not bring herself to the pitch of thinking that Beti—who was the mirror of fashion, the mould of form—could so degrade herself as to sink into the barbaric life of the primitive savage. She could not conceal her surging thoughts.

"How can you live such a life?" she cried.

"I have been living it these fifteen years," Beti replied.

Stella requested Beti to let her see her house, but she sighed and told Stella that she had no house to show. Stella was, nevertheless, anxious to see whatever it was, so Beti said that she would ask the "Malik" for the requisite permission. There was nothing else to talk about, for Beti had forgotten her books. The fine flowing robes of the modern Indian lady had been discarded for the homespun wrappings, beneath which stood the form of Beti, loaded with tawdry trinkets. Her nose had been pierced, and embellished with a hoop, which passed for a nose ring, while from her ears dangled long and multi-coloured pendants, which in their garishness would put the Venetian stones to shame.

Her forehead was adorned with several tinsel discs, and even her cheeks and chin were not free from them. Her hands held mighty golden handcuffs, flanked by gold and glass bangles. Even her elbow could not escape the bejewelled attention of two flattened bohtas.

At least three pounds avoirdupois of gold hung from her neck, and as if to make up for its shortcomings, some two or more pounds of gold were suspended from the waist, knees and ankles, while even the fingers and toes were hung with gold rings.

Gazing upon all this barbaric splendour, Stella ventured to put to her old friend a personal question :

“ Beti, do you like all this foppery ? ”

“ I do, now that I am used to it. If I didn’t wear it, I should not be respected by my tenantry. They would think I was only a keep, and not the wife of the malik.”

“ But don’t you sometimes pine for city life ? ”

“ No, I should be a stranger now to that society—it is a matter of habit.”

“ Beti, you were a refined and educated girl, how can you reconcile yourself to this bestial life ? ”

“ Habit ! ” she retorted briefly.

Beti had been plucked from her bower, to be the offspring of the monkey-god Hanuman. She, for whose hand a hundred knights would have risked their necks, was mated to a rustic whose only outstanding merit was his caste. She should naturally have loathed him, but now was consigned to love and adore him as her household deity. Such is the tyranny of caste ; such is power of social bondage.

Beti had already given birth to three sons and two daughters, and though she was only a little over thirty, she had forgotten her books, and only remembered the prevailing opinion that women had no souls, but were born to procreate sons, cook for the household, and feed the men and domestic cattle.

Stella reminded her of the bright pageant of her early life, but it had ceased to fire Beti's fancy. She gave only a faint smile, as if Stella was playing on a chord of which she had but a dim and doubtful recollection. All the fine tissues of her soul had withered. Their place had been taken by a coarse fabric, more in harmony with her altered life.

Her past life was a vivid recollection to Stella; to Beti it was but a faint shadow as of a dream. Stella was relieved to think that Beti had no regrets for the past, no hope of the future. She was happy, because her nature had become completely attuned to her present condition.

Stella told Himm that she would rather die than suffer such degradation. Himm thought that Man possessed a wonderful adaptability to environment. They visualized it, next morning, when the Malik escorted them to his Zenana.

His house was a large court-yard, the walls of which supported several slanting rooms, which ended in an open verandah. The open space was used as a cow-pen.

The room in which Beti received Stella had one door, but no windows. It was so designed in order to ensure privacy. Even the door was hung with a purdah, which had been used by the inmates as a wiper. A charpoy was placed in the room, and spread with a quilt in pink and blue.

The courtyard was used as a common room by the retainers, who came in there to squat upon their slabs and take their morning and evening meals. These were served on palm leaf platters, which were heaped in a corner for the rats to feed on, and mosquitoes to breed. The roof was begrimed with a generation of soot, which collected from an earthen chula, or hearth, upon which the lady of the house had to cook her daily delicacies.

Beti had just finished cooking these in readiness for Stella's visit. They were placed on a bronze plate, in small heaps, for Stella to eat with her fingers.

Stella did not take long to gratify her curiosity. She thanked Beti for her hospitality and left to join Himm, who was being similarly regaled in the porch, to the music of the bells and rattlers of the passing buffaloes.

"Well, Stella," he said, "have you seen the interior of an orthodox Indian household?"

"I have, but I wish I had never seen it."

"What are you worried about?"

"I can feel something stinging me all over!"

"That is nothing—it is only the household pets of Beti's husband. You have stolen some of them, I fear, and the Maliks will miss them."

"Don't jest, Himm—they are devouring me!"

"Did you expect to find rose petals?"

Stella was not in a humour to banter. She was being bitten by the hungry hordes of vermin which had got into her clothes. She made for her lodgings, in order to get rid of them. She turned all her clothes inside out, but found nothing to slaughter.

Stella discovered later on that the elusive vermin had taken refuge in her cot, and gave her a demonstration of their attention. She was inclined to scream, but she was a brave woman. After her night at Malik's guest house, she must be classed a heroine. She awoke with red eyes and a blue face, and called to Himm.

"Himm, you brute, you are responsible for all this torture. If you had not come with me, I should have escaped this living inferno."

Himm was nonplussed. What answer could he give to such a forcible accusation. He dropped his head with shame, promptly arranged a conveyance, and the couple were soon on the road to Gulshan-bagh.

"Himm, do you think it safe for me to travel in this cart? Do you think it is free from that pest!" she asked.

"You will be able to answer that question for yourself very soon!" he retorted.

"Himm, you are a tyrant. Why don't you answer a straight question. I demand to know whether this ramshackle lumber harbours germs."

"If it does, I have no notice of their presence, and I am sitting beside you."

"Yes, but they can't bite your rhinoceros hide—you wouldn't feel it even if they did. Let us get out of the cart, and walk."

It is no use arguing with a woman, so Himm meekly obeyed. He was sure that the cart was free from homicidal vermin, but he could not be quite certain. He had to abandon his comfortable perch and walk on the dusty road. Stella locked her hand into his, and moved along, complaining of drowsiness.

Fortunately, there was an empty palki passing along, so Himm hailed it for hire. Stella was already footsore, and her vicious grip of Himm had made the man's elbow equally painful.

She was delighted to get into the palki, and invited Himm to a seat opposite her.

Songs and talk brought Stella's journey to a pleasant end, for they soon reached Gulshanbagh.

Mrs. Heikle was reading her Bible in the garden, while Mr. and Mrs. Kacha had gone for an outing to a neighbouring station.

"Well, children, how did you enjoy your trip?" asked the old lady.

"Immensely, Mother. It has been the most exhilarating trip we have ever had in India. Himm, however, was poor company. I am angry with him. He was always so nasty, nagging, and sniggering, and never sparing my feelings."

Mrs. Heikle eyed Himm with evident amusement, for she knew her sex, and was not going to take all Stella's comments at their face-value.

"Child, you look tired and unkempt—go and have a wash!"

This advice Stella needed, and took.



## CHAPTER XXI

### IMAM'S BOMBSHELL

STELLA was in no mood to leave the beaten track. She had seen enough of the countryside, and did not long for a repetition of her experience. She was spending her holiday in the towns, with the much maligned Indians who adopt the European standard of orderliness. She had still two weeks before Imam wanted her, but one fine morning she received a message from him, which almost stunned her. It ran as follows :—

KACCHIPARA,  
*15th March.*

DEAR STELLA,

I grieve to have to write to you of a decision which it has taken me some time to confirm. Ever since my return, my dear father, who is now eighty, has been urging me to stay with him, as, if I left him for a foreign land, he might never be able to set his eyes again upon me before he quits this world. My people have also been pressing me to retire from the risky business which may any day face me with a collapse, specially as a powerful syndicate have monopolised the purchase of oysters in Ceylon and the Gulf. They have offered to buy me out, and I have accepted

their offer, so I have now no incentive to return to Europe.

As my father and all my people are pious followers of the Prophet—Peace be on him!—I have naturally to fall in with their wishes and adopt their mode of life. Rita will be free in a few months from her marriage ties, but I am writing to her to-day remitting her bond. As for yourself, I am prepared to do the same, but should you care to discuss the matter further with me, you are welcome; but you must not be surprised if you find me and mine only able to offer you the hospitality of an orthodox home.

Yours affectionately,

IMAM.

Stella had seen something of the hospitality of a Hindu home, but had still to imagine the hospitality of an orthodox Moslem. But this was a detail. She could understand Imam's solicitude for his aged father; but what she could not understand was his sudden plunge into retirement from a thriving business. She loved him far too much to discard him without discussion. Yes, she must go and talk the matter over with her husband.

As for Rita, she would plead for her.

Stella did not take counsel with her mother about the threatened thunderbolt. She assumed the guise of a cheerful guest, took leave of her and started for Kacchipara, a small wayside station in Kathiawar.

Imam received a wire about her arrival; but it happened to be a Friday, and Imam had gone to the mosque to offer his prayers—it was a small,

unpretentious shed, surrounded by barracks peopled by the Kacchis of his caste.

She entered an arcade and was shown a staircase, which led up to Imam's family house. It was built in a chawl, several hundred feet long, in which the partitions divided off the individual residences. The staircase was about fifteen inches wide, and the steps were of the same drop. She had learnt mountaineering with the Count, so she was, therefore, able to negotiate the ascent without much effort. But the steps were full of pitholes in which soft earth lay loose.

At the end of them stood a Kacchi servant, in white shirt, reminding her of the costume of the choir boys. She asked for Imam, and was told that he had not returned from the mosque. She asked for a place in which to wait, whereupon the servant produced a charpoy. She was tired and sat down to await her husband.

Hours passed but Imam was not visible. It was now six, and the sun was already casting its livid light on the wall opposite, which screened her from the Zenana where Imam's household had their dwelling.

Stella was thirsty and asked for a glass of water. The servant thought for a while, and then disappeared. He returned with a jugful of liquid, which he handed to the visitor, and after she had gulped down the first draught, she handed it back to the attendant, telling him in English that she had asked for water, and not sherbet, which could not quench her thirst.

The attendant took the jug, but did not return. Stella grew desperate. She went out into the

arcade, to catch sight of someone who would understand her wants. Fortunately a Kacchi was making his accounts in the verandah of an adjoining shop ; he caught her meaning, and after pressing her to take some sherbet, yielded to her entreaty to supply her with water.

Then she asked him if he spoke English.

" Yes, I do a little, as I sell cloth, rice, to Greek buyers."

Stella asked him how soon Imam might return. He did not know, but surmised that he must be in soon, as he had to say his evening prayers. Stella commissioned him to enquire, which he obligingly did.

A few moments later, a bearded and turbaned Sheikh, clad in spotless white, with rosary in hand, stood before her. She gave a start, and was about to ask him where Imam was—but Imam had already recognised her ! He invited her to follow him to his shop.

" But where is Mr. Imam ? I have come to see him."

" I am Imam, madam. Do you not recognise me ? " It was now dusk, but Stella recognised him by his voice.

She staggered when she set eyes upon the bearded moulvie, whose face and attire had so radically changed his appearance. Imam was a clean shaved, well-groomed gentleman, and had often been mistaken for an Italian. He was now an unmistakable Arab.

She followed him upstairs to a room full of women, where he left her without introduction. The women eyed her suspiciously, and began to titter.

Stella could not understand a word of the language in which they appeared to pass comments, presumably about her. The women were ten in number, and of all ages, the youngest being a girl in her teens. They all wore pantaloons, and had a wrapper to cover their bodies. Some of them were decidedly handsome, especially the one in gold-thread knickers. This special woman had an olive complexion and large dreamy eyes. Her face, however, was marred by her teeth, which, though regular, had become discoloured by the chewing of tobacco and the eating of pan. She appeared to be the mistress of the house, judging from her deportment and air of superiority. Could she be the purdah wife of her husband?

Stella had been seated in the midst of her own sex for over an hour, yet she could not utter a single syllable. Fancy a woman struck so dumb by her surroundings!

She chafed at the prolonged absence of her husband, but she did not know her bearings and could not ask any one to call.

The women offered her pan, which she could not take, snuff which she refused, and some clogging stuff which she did not like. She took some decoction which passed for tea; but it was a near approach to sherbet, and its flavour had been masked by the addition of rose water.

It was now nearing eight, and Stella had no idea where she was to rest for the night. Imam was still absent, for he could not show discourtesy to his father by leaving him before he retired. He was in the male apartment.

By nine o'clock, there was no sign of Imam. Ten, and still no sign. Eleven—no Imam.

Stella could wait for him no longer. She lay down where she sat, in her day clothes ; she was drowsy and went to sleep. She had a dream of the mirrored bedchamber where the last word of Parisian luxury and comfort rested her head. Here, she lay prostrate on a bare floor, with only a thin carpet, sans bed, sans pillow, and sans her husband ! She felt as if her back had been put upon a rack, and her head into a brick kiln.

But she had already discovered in Beti the astonishing adaptability of the human organization to the most dislocating conditions of life, and it gave her a crumb of comfort to feel that she did not stand alone in her hour of trial.

After a disturbed sleep, she woke up, being roused by a hand which lay upon her head. It was Imam, who had sent his father to bed, and was now free to turn to the female folk.

He asked Stella if she had had anything to eat, and her look gave the answer. He brought her some meat and chappatis, and placed them on a tin plate before her.

She ate them with all the appetite of a travel-worn hungry woman, then asked for water, but was given the eternal sherbet. She told Imam that she was thirsty, and that nothing but water would quench her thirst. Imam then gave her a quilt, to make a bed, and she fell asleep. It was her first night at her orthodox home.

Next morning she got up and found her body covered with blisters. What could it be, she asked herself. She did not realize that her sleep had been

invaded by a battalion of vermin-bugs and mosquitoes among them. But oblivious of their onslaught, she had had her much needed rest.

She washed and bathed, and dressed in the female apartment, compared to which Beti's apartment was a valhalla. The seraglio to which she was consigned was not to be compared with anything humanly conceivable. It blended every variety of malodour, and was littered with offal which was occasionally removed by a female slave. The contrast between Imam of Nor de Dame and Kacchipara was startling in the extreme.

Stella was, however, willing to brave it all, but her mind was ever on the alert as to her future. Imam had promised to discuss things with her, but he was affecting a strange aloofness. His pious living seemed to have paralysed his affection, and even his speech. Stella thought that if she could not speak to Imam, she could at least write to him ; and so she passed him a pencilled note, which said :

“DEAR IMAM,

I have been here two days, but get no chance of having a word with you. Please arrange to see me as promised, for I wish to discuss our future with you.

Yours affectionately,  
STELLA.”

Imam glanced at the note with unaffected nonchalance. His mental outlook had been completely transformed by the eastern setting ; when he had offered to discuss the question with Stella, he had no clear notion of what he was going to say, for he did

not see how he could fit Stella in with the scheme of his reformed life.

Stella was a European, and Imam wished to retain her, if only for the sake of the novelty.

But all her relations, neighbours and friends regarded the novelty with undisguised suspicion. Imam was wondering whether, in retaining the novelty, he might not have too great a price to pay.

Then there were the state interests to consider. They were domiciled in a native state, and the ruler might regard the intrusion of a foreigner as prejudicial to his policy. There were other reasons, and, bewildered by the confusion of counsel, Imam began to temporize with Stella. He allotted a small dingy bedroom to her but abstained from crossing its threshold. She was fed by an ancient maid, whose dirty attire and insanitary habits upset Stella.

Kacchipara was a singularly old-fashioned town, in an old-fashioned district, where the customs and the habits of the people were as old as Haroun al Raschid.

The fact is that Moslem civilization had reached its summit in times long past. It had no vitality left to enable it to rise higher. It had, therefore, to yield to the ruthless law of reaction.

It was useless arguing with the people, and a wasted effort trying to improve their moral fibre. They would only improve when they abandoned their old ideals and took kindly to the new.

But that time was not yet ! It may come, if the people become awakened to the world truths. It may never come, if the people continue to nurse their old dogmas, oblivious of the mighty changes



which time has wrought. Stella and Imam fitly typified the incongruity of the two ideals, their irreconcilability, their un-adaptability to each other, their reaction upon daily life.

There is nothing wrong with an Easterner; he has merely to alter his ideals. Some few have done so, and they are able to outwest the West. But they are the inaccessible peaks to the proletariat, though it is only a question of time when the light which illumines the top will descend to the valleys, and then the East will come into its own. But for the present it was a riddle of the sphinx, and Stella was trying to solve it in her own way.

She had now been waiting ten days for an interview. She had scribbled many chits, sent many messages; but no one in the household took any notice of her.

She rushed into the verandah where Imam was bending over his prayers. She let him conclude them; but no sooner had he finished, than she called upon him to make good his promise, or give her her release. This alternative Imam promptly accepted. In the presence of the assembled Moslems, he commenced pronouncing talak, once, twice, but before he could do so the third time, Haji Abdulla, the old octogenarian father, intervened.

"My son, do not be rash. Do not take a mean advantage of a defenceless woman. She has come to you to discuss a problem, and not to seek divorce. You must give her suitable audience."

"Very well, father Jan, very well. I withdraw my talak; as it is not yet too late. I will see the lady and hear her."

"Imam, when you married me, I did not know that it would come to this," began Stella.

"I did not know either."

"Have you then decided to resume your old ways?"

"Surely you can judge for yourself."

"Well, I am your wife, and desire to be treated as such."

"Wives in the Islam have no souls. You must abide by the Islamic law."

"I am ready to abide by any law by which you wish me to be bound. I am married to you, not to Islam, and I intend to play my part well."

"Then you will have to alter your habits, and adapt them to my wives' way of living. Are you prepared to do that?"

"If I were not, I would not have married you."

"I admire your wifely devotion, but you should not forget how difficult it will be for you, at your age, to start a new life."

"I can at least try," replied Stella.

"But it might create a situation of some embarrassment to me and my people."

"That alters the situation," Stella agreed. "I am here to console and comfort you, to be your companion in your joy and sorrow. If my presence is calculated to cause misunderstanding, I am ready to retire from my office."

Imam gave no further answer. He held a family conclave, in which the question was threshed out, pro and con.

Meanwhile, Stella had not failed to inform Himm of her quandary, and she received the following reply :

"DEAR STELLA,

I sympathise with you, but see no way out of it, except that you should purchase your release from an obligation which you can no longer discharge efficiently. Marriage implies friendship, and friendship mutual esteem. When it is wanting, why be an incubus upon your husband? You will never get used to your present life—it is impossible! So long as he assumed the veneer of the West, he was anxious to maintain an establishment upon the western model. Now that he has gone back to his shell, he is equally anxious to discard it. That is my advice."

Stella agreed; but let Imam take the initiative. The fact is, both Imam and Stella had come to the same conclusion, though viewing it from opposite standpoints.

Stella's dower worked out at a little under a lac of rupees. She received it, kissed Imam for the last time, and left him with her eternal blessings.

She returned to Himm's place and sought his advice. He purchased a paying boot trade for her, which Stella controlled with the aid of a manager.

At first, being new to the business, she soon found herself faced with bankruptcy. She had laid in a large stock of boots and shoes, which the wily makers sold to her at exorbitant rates. She complained to Himm of the coming crash, whereupon he suggested that she should mark all her goods with the "Shri Krishna" brand, and advertise their sale.

She took his advice, and within a week her shop was in a state of siege from the crowd of purchasers.

All her stock became exhausted, and she was unable to cope with the demand.

Stella was curious to learn the reason of her windfall, and asked her manager why it was that he had been able to push the sale of her wares. Was the change due to the talisman of Himm's advice.

"Yes, Mem Sahib," replied the manager. "All your purchasers are the Marwadis. Shri Krishna is their chosen god, and they cannot bear to see you branding the soles of your boots with his image. They buy your stock, only to destroy the trade-mark, which they would not permit anyone to trample upon."

"What becomes of my boots then?" asked Stella.

"Why," replied the manager, "the purchasers remove your brand, and sell the goods to the cobblers again for sale."

"I don't wish to offend their religion," said Stella. "I will write to Himm."

She did so, and it was a revelation to Himm. When making the suggestion, he had indeed thought of the religious impulse, but had misconceived its probable effect. He was sorry that he had made the thoughtless suggestion, and advised Stella to alter her trade-mark. But the idea had caught on. The boot market was now flooded with footwear bearing her counterfeit trade-mark. Stella was unable to stop the contraband trade in Shri Krishna boots; she was glad that she had disposed of her stock, but sorry that she had unwittingly given currency to an impulse fraught with such potential mischief. She registered her trade-mark, and secured an injunction against its

imitation, wound up her business, and retired to the Queen of Hill Stations, where she settled down to a life of peace and careless leisure.

She was now in clover. Occasionally she would write to Imam, but his replies were homilies quoted from his holy writ. It was clear that his mind had become possessed of religious mania. He retired into a sanctuary, and was lost to the world.

## CHAPTER XXII

### SHAHINDA AT THE VARSITY

SHAHINDA was the produce of the new cult, which, without discrimination between the two divisions of creation, and the radical differences between them, makes both digest the learning designed for man. No account is taken of the æsthetic aptitude of a woman, nor that the man's occupational education would not fit a woman. It is assumed that a man is as fit to practise sewing and drawn-thread work as a woman to learn mathematics and mechanics.

Shahinda entered the University of Cambridge, and was welcomed by the students as a pretty Indian, with brains. She made use of her brains by applying her mind assiduously to study.

Her education had begun early, and had from infancy hardened her character. Her University education went still further to unsex her, and she emerged with a high degree, but without those special qualities ascribed to women. She was in fact quite unsexed. While her mind expanded, her heart contracted, and at the end of it all, she ceased to be a woman, except that she had a woman's frame, which she encased in a colourable imitation of a man's attire. Her acts and thoughts were

those of a man, as she confessed to Himm when she first met him later on.

"Shahinda, you are so beautiful. Why didn't you marry?" asked Himm.

"I never wanted to do so; I feel a repugnance towards marriage and man. That question will never enter into my friendship with you."

"But my presence may act as a reminder."

"Lifelong association with hundreds of boys has blunted, perhaps deadened, that faculty."

"But your female charm of speech and action does not give me that indication."

"It is the shell that remains; the rest has long since decayed and disappeared."

Shahinda did not show any outward signs of an unsexed blue stocking; but her medical education conspired with her environment to give her mind a new turn. It was like a red-hot iron bar which, when put out to cool, often describes fantastic curves. Her intensive education had nourished the mind; but the emerging fluid, while flowing to the brain, had ignored the seat of emotion. She told Himm that she was very fond of inflicting surprises upon her dear ones, appearing before them when least expected, and disappearing from view for reasons which baffled conjecture.

Her friendship with Himm had a steadying effect upon her oddity, and she seemed cured of it. The magnetism of his personality had not only improved her health, but had clarified her mental vision.

. . . . .

The dreary monotony of Himm's existence was broken by a short visit necessitated by a professional

call to England. He cabled to Stella the date of his arrival.

Stella had not seen him for several years, but Himm sent her the intimation as a mere form, to disarm any complaint that Stella was sure to make when he called upon her. He had no idea of the reception she had planned for him.

She came in her own car to meet him at Charing Cross, and insisted upon his staying with her for the present. The span of years that had separated Stella from Himm seemed to have added to her fondness for him, the accumulated store of which she began to lavish upon him from the moment of his arrival.

Imam was absent in Paris; but she knew he would not mind, and even if he did, she was prepared to take the risk which, she thought, was at worst negligible.

She made Himm thoroughly at home and comfortable. She held a grand reception in his honour, at which all the leading Indians of both sexes were invited.

Shahinda was amongst them. She had heard about Himm's ability, but had no idea that the picture presented to her would be so feeble when compared with the original.

The company was large and mixed, numbering several hundreds. Every phase of occidental and oriental beauty was represented at the reception. There was Sybil, Himm's old friend, who was making a furore in the world as the leading manager-actress. There was her younger sister, a rollicking hoyden from Leyden, where she had been to touch up her music. Lilawati and Saraswati were two



exponents of Indian beauty. Lilawati hailed from the happy valley of Kashmir, than which there is no greater paradise on earth.

Saraswati was the solitary deserter from the caste-ridden hell of Hindustan. She ploughed her lonely furrow in the midst of Englishwomen, Bengalis, Marathas, Madrasis, Burmese, and the representatives of every Asiatic country and nation. Her dark, dreaming eyes, set off by her light complexion and rippling raven hair, reaching to her knees, made her an outstanding figure. She was an accomplished musician, played on her vina, and with her delicious notes, pathetic and gay, she sent the company into hysterics of alternate delight and despondency.

But while the eyes of the assembled guests turned on these accomplished beauties, Himm's eyes fell on Shahinda, who was no musician, but was evidently tolerating the display of talent with becoming appreciation.

Himm was suddenly fired by a craving to go and shake Shahinda by the hands; he felt as if he had always loved and cherished her in the innermost recesses of his mind. He did not know who Shahinda was, but she had the escort of a friend, who might be anything to her—her uncle, brother, or even husband.

Himm had no idea whether Shahinda was single or married; the only thought he had was this sudden casting of a deep spell upon him. He was prepared to barter his freedom for her slavery.

Himm was by nature a timid man, and by no means a lady-killer. He had, moreover, been mesmerized by Shahinda's presence into an un-

wonted stupor. He wanted to speak to Shahinda, and even kiss her, but he was shy. While he was mustering his courage, Shahinda was lost in the crowd, and vanished.

Himm did not even know her name, and could only describe her. But his description was too politic to give any clue to Stella as to the identity of the lady. She made several tries at the person described, but always stumbled upon a wrong one.

Himm felt that his life was bound up with this stranger. Destiny had cast their lives in different places, but they were fragments of a great soul, hurled into space, which had assumed corporeal existences just as a falling meteor intermittently flashes light in its course, till it has completed its appointed orbit.

Shahinda, too, had a queer feeling about Himm, for which she could not account. It was not love, for she had not spoken one word with him. It was not curiosity, for she knew all about Himm, who was now a public celebrity. She had always admired him, but she had never experienced a similar feeling before. It was a queer, indescribable feeling, welling out of her sub-conscious mind—a pleasant feeling, but at the same time oppressive; a feeling that she would like to rush to Himm, but she felt a natural restraint, since it would scandalize society, and Himm might consider her too forward.

Her escort detected her moodiness and questioned her about it. She confessed to her feeling, but was unable to account for it. Jiwanji suggested a drive, to which Shahinda gave a thoughtless assent. They drove out of the town, and as they approached a field, Shahinda said that she would

prefer to rest on the moor, for she was feeling queer.

Her "brother" gladly acceded to her proposal.

Jiwanji dared not question Shahinda closely, for he was comparatively a stranger to her. He had befriended her by doing some favours for her, and she expressed her gratitude by adopting him as her brother.

But her image had already been deeply cut upon Himm's mind. Its cameo stood imprinted in his heart, and had altered the whole course of his being. A new light had flared up in his bosom.

He roamed all over England, but failed to find any trace of Shahinda, who had finished her course, donned her new cap and gown, taken her degree, and had returned home to India, to take up an appointment in the hospital at Gulshanbagh.

Himm and Stella had been life-long friends, so he told her of his infatuation. Stella laughed at his passing fancy.

"You seem to wear your heart upon your sleeve, Himm. You are an idealist—not a practical man. Now listen to the advice of a practical woman—one who loves you and has lived in the world. If you want to marry, you will never be satisfied till you have a European partner. You are an Indian by birth, but a European by breeding. You can never find happiness with an Indian woman, who, in spite of her veneer of European culture, is in her heart an Oriental. An Oriental woman loves ease. She is too conscious of her rights, but resents it if she is reminded of her duties. She wants to play the grand dame, but she does not know the stuff of which they are made."

"But, Stella, I am a nationalist, and have made up my mind upon that subject. I married an Indian woman, but she has played me false. It has not disheartened me."

"But are you not taking a risk?"

"There is nothing worth having in life without risk."

"Then, if your mind is set upon your own women, what about two such charmers as Lila and Saraswati. I can arrange for you to meet them."

"But I don't want a woman. I want the one woman whom I feel to be predestined to be mine. She came but has disappeared. Yet she cannot fail to follow fate."

"You are a superstitious man, in spite of your education. Why, a man can be happy with any woman reasonably suited to his tastes! Look at myself. I am perfectly happy with Imam, and Imam with me, yet we were strangers only a few months before we married."

"Yes, but your adaptability is wonderful. All women do not possess it."

"They can all acquire it if they try," she retorted. "It is only a question of practice. What if the girl of your fancy is already married, or does not favour your suit?"

"If she is the woman, and I am the man, such a thing is impossible."

"You are a hopeless sentimentalist, Himm. You are passing through the world as ducks pass through the water. You could not have lived so long without gaining experience—but, of course, natures differ. What would the world be if they did not!"

Stella was in no mood to launch further into the region of speculation. She thought that she had already gone far afield. She cut short the discussion by suggesting to Himm a change to the seaside.

He agreed, so Stella drove him to a fashionable watering-place, where he could see the mail boats riding the waves.

Himm fancied his Shahinda in every one of them, and they reminded him of his own impending departure.

India is a large continent, though it boasts only a handful of educated women; they remain scattered far and wide. Nevertheless, Himm hoped to stumble against Shahinda any day. His mind's eye could see her delicious vision everywhere; it had begun to live with him, and entered into his day dreams. He pictured himself talking to her, and Shahinda giving that delicious smile which had held him in thrall at Stella's reception.

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## CHAPTER XXIII

### STELLA MEETS SHAHINDA

IN the summer, when her business could be safely entrusted to a manager, Stella managed a private hotel at Mussourie, which she had taken over from its retiring proprietor.

This favourite hill resort was largely patronised by the plainsmen, who went to escape the heat of the plains. The Metropolitan had already acquired a peninsular reputation for its cuisine, and its cleanliness, which increased under the capable management of the managers of a Paris salon.

Its accommodation was limited, and it soon began to be regarded as a privilege to be admitted to its hospitality.

In the summer of 1921, Shahinda had applied for it and was refused. She then wrote a private note to Stella, reminding her of her "crescent" reception, and desiring to renew her acquaintance.

Stella read the letter, rubbed her eyes, and read it again. Was she the Shahinda who had captured Himm's fancy?

She invited her over, and as Shahinda was yearning for a whiff of the hills, she lost no time in announcing her arrival. Stella met Shahinda at the gate, received her with marked cordiality, and showed her into her best suite.

Stella then went to her own room, and lost no time in pulling out her writing desk, but before her pen could fall upon the paper, a doubt arose in her mind whether Shahinda was a free woman. Some years had passed since they had met, and who knew what changes time might have made in Shahinda's commitments. She would not inform Himm till she was quite sure about Shahinda's intentions. She would have a chat with her after dinner and sound her before writing to Himm.

Shahinda was curious to know something about Stella's past. Her curiosity had been whetted by the confused rumours she had heard from persons at second-hand. The fact is, Shahinda was anxious to hear about Himm, just as he was anxious to know about her. Chance had brought them in contact with a mutual friend, or was it Providence?

Stella did not take long to learn about Shahinda's interest in Himm. She decided to spring a pleasant surprise upon her friend. She would invite him for her own sake, and await the result. She sent a cordial invitation for him to stay at her house, which, she said, was full to overflowing, including some very nice people.

Himm had been worried with work. He was undecided as to his holidays, but Stella's letter gave his mind a decisive turn. He wired his departure, and two days later was walking up the gully which led to the Metropolitan gardens.

Stella was in her room, sipping tea with Shahinda, but heard Himm's familiar voice in the hall.

"Here is Himm!" she cried. "Come in, Mr. Himm."

After the introduction, she asked Himm to excuse

her for a few minutes. Stella squeezed Himm's hand, and was gone.

He had never been a lady's man, but Shahinda had visibly blushed as soon as her eyes fell upon him. An embarrassing feeling seized Himm.

There sat the very girl he had been seeking all these years. It was as if a hole had been made in the sky, and the angels of Mercy had let down the very woman for whom he was willing to die.

Himm unwittingly drew his chair nearer to Shahinda, and she drew hers nearer to his. Their eyes met. They were like two lovers who had been seeking each other for a lifetime. It was impossible to decide who was the more pleased to meet the other.

"Come into my room, Shahinda," he begged.

Shahinda's answer was a move to the door. They had been soul-mates in their past lives, otherwise she could not have allowed such familiarity. She was a proud and reserved girl, and shy to a fault.

She was now a woman in the zenith of her beauty and power, and when Himm first touched her hand, to accord her his ceremonious greeting, his own hand shook, lest it should compress into deformity so delicate a creation of Nature.

But it was a strong hand, firm, and as it grasped his, it seemed to pass the message which filled Himm's heart with hope. Shahinda's handshake was that of one who had greeted an old friend.

She was clad in a dazzlingly bright sari, the gold hem of which framed her face. Its tint of the dawn added to her appearance a lustre which was heightened by a suppressed blush, which a throb of anticipation had painted upon her cheeks.



## CHAPTER XXIV

### SHAHINDA AND HIMM

FOR over two years, Shahinda and Himm were inseparable in mind and thought. They were inseparable in body, except when each had to answer the call of duty. In Shahinda's eyes, Himm was the personification of every manly virtue ; to Himm, Shahinda was the apple of his eyes.

Shahinda was a highly intellectual girl, who had drunk deep at the Parnassian springs, but had remained uncontaminated by study. She wore the white flower of purity in thought and action, and despised the taudry embellishments of attire. No trinkets adorned her person, while her love of art adorned her drawing-room, and the neat sobriety of her mind adorned her mantelpiece. Her food was simple, though she could feed a gourmand, for her cookery would have put many a professional chef to shame. She was careful of her utterances, guarded in her praise or blame, an antiquarian and a connoisseur of art. She was rightly described by Himm as "adorable."

Adorable she was, in more senses than one, for, when endowing her with rare beauty of form and figure, Nature appeared to have suspended the divine law of compensation; since it is rare that it endows a soul with intellect of a high order, and beauty of physique and form.

Himm was a man of robust build, and endowed with singular versatility. He was one of those people who adorn whatever they touch, and whose presence in the forum, or in the temples of learning, give *éclat* to those places, which, without him, seemed denuded of ornament.

Their kindred spirits had brought them together; their kindred natures cemented their friendship till it became an idyll. Shahinda saw nothing but Himm as the embodiment of her pleasure. To Himm the image of Shahinda was an inspiration which raised his genius to inaccessible heights.

There is no such thing as love in excess, though it may be in excelsis. When love reaches this degree, it produces mental intoxication. The beloved is idealized, and ceases to be of the earth.

No amount of argument will convince the lover that she could ever have been of the earth, earthy. She is a creature apart from the rest of creation, one who is on the earth but not of it. She is the all-beautiful, all-wise, all-perfect being, whom the poet in his wildest frenzy cannot describe, the painter in his highest *afflatus* cannot portray.

Such is the inamorata to her lover: such was Shahinda to Himm. She was his gospel, his religion. He was idolatrous, a heathen, and worshipped the image of Shahinda. To him, Shahinda was the world; to him, the world was a void without her.

So long as he was under her spell, he did not, could not, see anything in the world more beautiful than Shahinda. Her spell was at times shaken by her vagaries, but it was never lost.

The secret of Shahinda's mastery over Himm

was not her beauty, but her intellectuality. Himm would often draw her out by adopting the Socratic method of involving her in a dialogue, in which he would wantonly play the rôle of the ignoramus.

Himm did not always see eye to eye with Shahinda, for she was by habits a social recluse, and it was a surprise to him that she should have thought so deeply, and seen so clearly the current fallacies, to which she gave expression in her confidential chats with him. The man was a convinced democrat; but Shahinda cleared his cobwebs by catechising him as to what he meant by democracy.

"Why, democracy means the rule of the people, by the people, for the people."

"I have heard that before!" she retorted. "There is no such thing as real democracy, for it would bring the millennium. Democracy is the aspiration of the many, the pretext of the few. The latter wield all power, and make everyone believe."

"But who are the people?" asked Himm.

"Why, the masses make the people; the people a nation. It all depends how you mould them. But as men singly, so nations in the aggregate have their appointed lives. They die without the hope of resurrection."

"But even nations die and are born again. Look at Italy!"

"There is no life but the life of action. A life without action is like a sound without song. It is not the years that make life, but its achievement."

"Well, look at Mussolini. Has he not transformed Italy, and recalled the greatness of Rome?"

"Yes, but he is too near us to be seen in his

proper perspective. He will be seen best a hundred years after he is dead. Don't forget that nations rise or fall by their own momentum, though they may be jacked up by external energy for a time—but it will only be for a time."

"What is the test of greatness?" asked Himm. "Has not Italy produced a multitude of great men. Has the world seen another Marconi?"

"If great people could beget great men, this world would soon be filled with greatness. Greatness is nature's freak, which it seldom repeats. Nature abhors a vacuum and greatness alike. It fills the one with imponderable matter; it chokes the other with weeds."

"But a man may be born great, but his greatness may never come to light for want of opportunities. I believe the world could produce ten times as many great men as it possesses. It does not give them a chance."

"Yes, but the path of greatness is sprinkled with blood, mixed with tears," protested Shahinda. "How many are prepared to make that sacrifice?"

Himm thought that Shahinda was getting too serious, so he gave a dexterous turn to her thoughts.

"It seems to me that greatness might be indefinitely multiplied. It is only a question of the wise selection of seed."

"Not always!" she retorted. "An intellectual plant may produce an intellectual crop, but it will do so by mistake. As I said before, Nature is cruelly jealous of greatness."

"Still, I think that the race would greatly improve if there were better marriages."

"I agree. Marriage to-day is a lottery in which

the prizes are few. At the same time, it must not be supposed that a marriage of the intellectuals would produce a race of giants."

"But how much better the world would be if we had more happy marriages. They would produce a finer race, and men of ideas," said Himm.

"Yes, but beware of a man of ideas. He is often more dangerous than a conscript nation."

"I was not thinking of revolutionaries, but of the apostles of Peace."

"You were thinking of the founders of religion. Well, what of them? If all religions were true, there would be no true religion."

"But they have all taught true lessons of high morality."

"As such, they were policemen, not the messiahs."

"Well, they have not failed to solve the problems of life and death."

"Yes, in their own way, but that is the pity of it. They have failed to realise that the aim of life is not contemplation, but action. Its end is not annihilation but happiness. As for after-life, one thing is certain—that there is no survival of consciousness, no persistence of personality. All consciousness is sensual, and death is the failure of the senses. How can there be the continuance of individuality, after death has closed it?"

"But may not there be a super-consciousness which defies death?" asked Himm.

"It is a possibility, but what good would it do if a man retained his self after death? His consciousness was of the earth and material; with the dissolution of matter, consciousness can have no meaning. It would do nobody any good. Death

is stated to be a change of form, but with that change, the Self ceases."

Himm had discovered a new vein in Shahinda. He had not known that she was a votary of philosophic speculation. He egged her on to further discussion.

Walking hand in hand in the moon-illuminated night, he wondered if the stars were tenanted with a higher intelligence.

"If they were, a super-Marconi might have apprised us of it long ago," she remarked.

"But how could we know that they were sending signals from Mars?"

"If they were, the signallers would have taken care to see that we received them. We think of interplanetary excursion—though we are as yet far from accomplishing it—why should not the supermen of other planets have achieved where we have lacked."

"Then you do not believe in the higher souls inhabiting those distant regions?"

"It is not for me to believe—I can only think. If such souls gave us a call, we would believe."

"It is perhaps a secret, which God has chosen not to reveal to us," remarked Himm piously.

"That is a dogma of despair," she retorted.

"It seems to me that we were made to believe."

"Yet the Almighty abstains from giving us the details—would not all religious rancour disappear if He came and told us a little about Himself?"

"But He does so, through His prophets!" protested Himm.

"Yes, but He must know that their credentials are doubted. Can a just God punish us for doubt-

ing, when He provides us with no infallible data. Can the King punish me for disobeying his laws, when he does not authorise their publication ? ”

It was clear that Shahinda was a born rationalist. To her, the life to live was the life of the people amongst whom she was born. These higher truths gave consolation to her mind. They drew contempt for the half-truths and no-truths which were the mere man's daily counters.

It was in this intellectual partnership—both in topics grave and gay—that Shahinda excelled herself. She did not always agree with Himm; on the contrary, she often disagreed, and when she did so, she was tenacious of her views, and would not retire from her position, which was at times untenable.

But it was in these differences that Shahinda presented the contrasting nature which made Himm think. If two friends could think alike, so that they could never disagree, they would cease to count as dual personalities. In speaking to each other, they would be speaking as it were to themselves. Different view-points are the sauce of reason, the seasoning of mind. It gives an added charm and variety to life. It widens its vision, enlarges its knowledge, and corrects its conceit.

Their lives were a poem of perfect happiness ! If Himm's head ached, her heart experienced torment; her hand was its salve. If her body was tired, the touch of his hand restored its strength. If two souls could hypnotise each other by their presence, those were Shahinda and Himm.

A relationship so close, a union so firm, could not be sundered by death. For, if souls are immortal,

as the poet and philosopher agree, their immortality is naught if not perpetuated in such unions.

Beauty is defined as unity in variety, and their lives illustrated it. Theirs was a unity of intellectual kinship, but a variety of ideals and tastes, which enlarged their experience and widened the circle of their enjoyment. If two persons were exactly alike in taste and habits, they would make a sorry couple. Shahinda and Himm were not. They differed at times, and each strove to bring conviction home to the other. Sometimes they ended in agreement; sometimes their differences were irreconcilable, but this did not mar the harmony of their lives.

Shahinda and Himm had so absorbed the inner light of each other, that she could think for him, and he for her, and they were seldom wrong. He could read her mind like a book—she could see his mind as in a looking-glass. There were then no secrets between them, because there was no hidden place in the mind of either to conceal them from the other.

Himm's devotion to Shahinda was her daily tonic. Her devotion to Himm was his daily inspiration. If the one was absent, the other felt out of sorts. They were food and drink to each other, with this difference, that food and drink nourish the body, while Shahinda's presence nourished Himm's soul. It was a soul which grew with the nourishment it received from her.

In one of their lonely moonlight walks, he referred to the Pythagorean friendships. Himm suggested that they were their descendants, and Shahinda agreed.



"Then do you agree to tie the knot of perpetual friendship with me—a tie that death shall not sever, but which shall last for here and hereafter?" he asked.

"I never promise what I cannot do," she replied.

"But I did not expect you to make a rash promise."

"What will be the use of such promises?"

"It will be the last milestone in our journey," he explained.

"Have we not already reached it?"

"That is why we should declare it," Himm persisted.

"Well, if declarations count, there is no harm in declaring it."

"Shahinda, look at the moon, look at the heavenly hosts, and the starry firmament. Say that they are mine, and take me as yours."

"I do, Himm; I did it mentally long ago."

"Shahinda, you realise that you have united your soul to mine."

"I feel it."

"Then, comrade in peace, and comrade in arms, we will fight life's battle together, and, God willing, we shall leave an imperishable name on the scroll of time."

"I do not wish to perform so sacred and solemn an act on a dust-heap. It must be done on a site which I will select."

She selected an ancient garden, abutting on a stream—a garden in which blew the glory of spring, and the air of which was redolent of its fragrance.

"On this site, I will give you my word, and receive yours," she said.

“ All right, Shahinda—what shall be the form ? ”

She then prescribed the form in which she bound herself to Himm as his eternal soul-mate, while Himm gave her a similar pledge. It was a marriage of conscience, a perpetual vow of friendship, the union of two in one.

Himm and Shahinda both knew that this was no idle fooling. Himm was an earnest man, while she was equally sincere. She took the oath before eternity; she knew its meaning, and described it to Himm in terms which he himself could not have dreamt of. She meant to keep it, and she lived up to it so long as a cross-beam did not deflect her course.

“ Himm,” she said, “ now that we have joined ourselves in friendship, do you know what it means ? Friendship to me is a most sacred word—more sacred than any relationship which man can contract, deeper than the ocean, firmer than the rock, steadier than the polar star. It is to me the symbol of faith and love and charity. In finding a friend, I own all I esteem most real, most sacred, most worthy. Such art thou now to me. Such I shall be, whether thou art or not. Remember my words. I have spoken ! ”

With this, she clung to Himm, kissed him thrice, and blessed him, offering a prayer to the Almighty to consecrate and perpetuate her friendship.

But a short separation and the crossing of a shadow altered Shahinda's life. For six months, she was called away from his presence—other scenes and other friends, and her womanly nature, caused her to fall a victim to other allurements. Himm pined for her, ever, as before ; but she was

growing frigid. Perhaps she had loved not wisely, but too well, and a reaction had set in. She who had lived in the dreamland of intellectual delight was slowly descending to the dustland of seclusion and secretive isolation. She who was his fixed star became an erratic meteor, furtive as an elusive firefly. He could not divine the reason; she could not divine the difference.

"Shahinda, how is it that you have begun to shun my company?" he asked.

"I am not aware of it."

"But you do try to avoid me!"

"Why not? You have overfed me with affection and I suffer from indigestion."

She who was the least secretive of all girls became as secretive as a spy. She who was the most lovable of all women, became as unemotional as a stone statue. She who had never felt happy except when she was with Himm, began to feel uncomfortable when in his presence.

She said that she was watched, but she had snapped her fingers at Mrs. Grundy. She had risen above the smoke and dust of social fixations. The reason she gave was invented in order to lull Himm's suspicions; the cause was far more potent, and it had begun to influence her life. It had begun to mar the purity of her thought, and the transparency of her action. It had lowered the standard of her life, and curved the course of her rectitude.

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## CHAPTER XXV

### THE MYSTERY MAN

SHAHINDA had been too hard at work. Naturally of a fragile build, her health began to give way under the pressure of her exacting duties. She took six months' leave to recuperate.

Himm wanted to know where she was going, but she was always secretive about her movements. She gave no reply beyond the very misleading one, "I don't know."

As a matter of fact, she was planning for a stay at Kanganalore. Himm promised to escort her to her holiday home, but Shahinda coined a plausible excuse, saying that as she was going home first, her departure for her holiday was naturally uncertain.

But she promised to let him know, which she did not do, but went alone to Kanganalore. She liked to take lonely journeys, and this was one of them. She, however, sent a letter to Khichdipur, where Himm was then living, to let him know that she had passed his home, and had not forgotten him. It was a provocative act, but it was Shahinda's nature.

On reaching Kanganalore, Shahinda complained of the place as wholly unsuitable for her holidays. Himm promised to look her up, and take her to

another place. Shahinda feared that Himm might execute his threat, so she promptly replied, assuring him that she had changed her mind. The fact is that the complaint she had made to Himm she had made equally to others—amongst them to an affable old gentleman, to whom she became casually attached.

This man began to evince a special interest in Shahinda, took entire charge of her, and once he became possessed of her, it did not take him long to become very friendly. This man was Dadanna, who hailed from Madras, and his plebeian name showed that he stood none too high in the social scale here. In life he had been a rolling stone, commercial traveller, insurance agent, printer, editor, and finally a schoolmaster. He had retired to Kanganore on a small pension, and lived with his youngest brother, and a son aged fifteen. Nothing was known of the rest of his family.

He was a well-preserved man, and had picked up nuggets of worldly wisdom in his varied career. One thing he had mastered; he was an accomplished lady killer.

Shahinda had gone to Kanganore for a change; she had stumbled against Dadanna by chance. He was polite to her, offered her his good offices and hospitality. Shahinda called herself a "pauper." She refused both; but soon she swallowed her pride, and became a humble henchwoman to the man whose very name had been Greek to her only the night before.

She wrote to Himm that she had adopted a guardian.

"MY DEAR HIMM,

I have been unwell for some days, but I am now better. I am glad to say that I have found a very nice man to take care of me here. He is very unlike you, Himm, for he never argues, and I like him. I have adopted him as my guardian, and have become his ward. I am sure you will like the gentleman, when you meet him, as you are sure to do if you ever chance to meet me.

Yours affectionately,  
SHAHINDA."

Himm was surprised to hear of a stranger suddenly introduced into their lives.

"MY DEAR SHAHINDA (he wrote),

You need no guardian, but what you do require is rest. Take it by all means—and avoid hasty adoptions.

Yours affectionately,  
HIMM."

But the influence which Dadanna had gained over her had already outrun Shahinda's attachment to Himm. A woman's love is a plus and minus equation—as her love for one grew, her love for another diminished.

Dadanna was an accomplished courtier; he had heard of Shahinda's attachment to Himm, and it was his duty to undermine it. How he managed it, Himm, of course, could never know. But he could see its effect.

In her next letter, Shahinda wrote that as Himm had often accused her of being *non compos mentis*,

she was trying to live up to her reputation. While some people adopted a son, she had decided to adopt a father. She added that Himm should be glad that she had now someone to love, and to live for.

Himm read the letter, but decided that it had been penned in one of those serio-comic veins in which Shahinda delighted to tease and torment her lover. It was her one pastime. Himm wrote a bantering reply, congratulating Shahinda upon securing a haven of rest and love, and hoping that she would now close her ever-widening circle of adoptions.

Shahinda felt insulted at Himm's trifling with her passion. She wrote that she was in earnest, and loved Dadanna with all the filial love of which she was capable, and that her duty to him would henceforth curtail her correspondence, which her lover should not take amiss.

Shahinda and Dadanna had made themselves as inseparable as she and Himm had been before. She had already published her familiarity with him by announcing her adoption of him. All her pent-up affection was let loose upon her new-found "father." She toyed and played with him, as a kitten plays with its mother. It was clear that she was acting, but the display of her histrionic faculty often created an embarrassing situation to onlookers, who could not understand the meaning of her new-fangled love. When friends came to see her, she was unhappy until "Daddy" was with her to toy with.

Dadanna felt embarrassed at the outpouring of Shahinda's affection. He tried to dodge her

approaches, which he shrewdly guessed might be mistaken by others. But Shahinda was reckless, and did not care for comments.

Himm was no fool. He knew that Shahinda's eccentricity was growing since her ailment. The weaker she grew in body the stronger grew her attachment. Mrs. Newman shook her head, and strove to bring her to reason; but it was useless.

Shahinda had a proverb for every emergency, and as proverbs cover the entire range of human thought, she had an inexhaustible storehouse from which she could quote, and thus silence her interlocutors.

Mrs. Newman was fresh from Girton, and she too had drifted to Kanganore for a change. She met Shahinda and Himm, who had motored to Kanganore to give her a hasty look-up between professional calls. He returned from Kanganore, thoroughly convinced that the climate of Kanganore had driven all fancy out of Shahinda's mind, and that she was now held in the iron grip of that old humbug Dadanna.

After lifelong starvation for a congenial soul, Himm had found one, but, alas ! the soul was not the soul of a woman; it was the soul of a Gorgon. In spite of his all-devouring passion for her, to which she pretended to respond, without a moment's warning she cut him adrift, and in a dramatic way. She invited Himm to see her, and as soon as he was face to face with her, she asked why he had come.

Himm opened his mouth to explain, but she closed it like a mouse-trap, and when he opened it again, she threatened to turn him out, by setting upon him a man she had in the house.



Himm quoted poetry to her—verses of his own composition, which had acted as talismans upon rebellious souls, and whose phantasy and music would, he thought, subdue her bottled-up passion. But she was adamant.

Himm had not come wholly unasked, so how could he leave without even a word of explanation for this strange behaviour? But she gave him no chance. As often as he called on her, she stood at the threshold of her sitting-room, and would not advance till she had the escort of her male admirer. Himm tried to ask her a few necessary questions which had been tormenting him; but much to his surprise and discomfiture, she shouted the questions back to him, which made the witness, whom she had brought, cock up his ears, as if scandalised by the talk Himm was introducing.

Holding discretion as the better part of valour, Himm changed the tone of his talk, and after a few moments of banalities, an idea struck him that he might pretend to ask her leave to go. It was possible, he thought, that she might extend to him the courtesy of coming out a few steps to show him to his car.

She did so, but not without calling for her “Dearie” to come out, which, mercifully, he failed to do.

Himm then asked her for an explanation of her strange behaviour, and told her that he was willing to go back, at which she seemed to be indifferent, though she showed clearly from her manner that his precipitate departure would be a *casus belli*, from which they should have no escape.

Himm afterwards decided that she had not

sufficiently tormented him on the first day, and wanted to see him hang on indefinitely, eating the humble crust of her callous cruelty.

Shahinda was like a cat playing with a big mouse she had caught. She would give just sufficient soft taps to the poor creature to make him feel that he was being toyed with. But when, in his agony, he tried to escape to a safer corner, down came her paw to disable him from moving. He was again given a gentle tilt, with the same result. But never has feline ferocity spared the life of its quarry; but the quarry does not know this till it is too late. Himm was in the same predicament, for he believed that Shahinda still loved him. He could not think otherwise, for his reason would not let him conceive of any other possibility. He hugged to himself the vain delusion that Shahinda was testing his fidelity. But testing it for what? He had given her no occasion for doubting it. He respected her far too much above the infirmities of her vacillating sex to believe that his place had been taken by some one else in her affection.

She hinted darkly of some reasons which had made her change her mind, but when she ventured to enumerate them, she had to confess that they were neither real nor substantial, but invented and contradictory. However, she promised that she would give her real reasons later on.

Every day, Himm went to Shahinda, and received the same answer. But her demeanour was becoming variable. At one moment she would pass a kind word, which fell like dew upon his scorched soul. But no sooner had he recovered himself,

than she let fall a caustic aside, which fell like a sledge hammer upon his rising spirits.

In this way, he would sit with her in a mixed company for an hour or two, and afterwards be dismissed from her presence with an encouraging word.

"If I can see you to-morrow, I will call you on the 'phone," she would say, which intensified Himm's nerve-racking suspense.

By nature, Himm was more than ordinarily susceptible to his surroundings. These surroundings, atmospheric and personal, were vying with each other to add to his agony. He went to sleep, but passed a sleepless night. His mind was kept awake by attempted essays at thought-reading. Had he been crossed in love? No, she was far too honourable to have concealed it from him, for had he not asked her, again and again, if she continued to love him, and had she not casually replied, or implied, that there was no change?

Then what was it? He ran through his mind all his real and imaginary misdeeds. Had they frozen her heart? No, because up to the last, she had been penning endearing letters, and when he complained once of a certain frigidity in her tone, she had made immediate amends by sending him a love-letter, which sufficed to quell his doubts and decided him to pay her a visit.

Himm thought how happy man would be if there were no women enchanters to cloud his happiness. But bachelors or no bachelors, no man can escape the toils of woman!

Every night, Himm made a grim determination to end the incident the next day. Every morning,

he awoke with a racking headache, in which his courage began to falter. By evening, when he was privileged to call, his anxieties and vows of the night were laid aside, and Himm was once more in Shahinda's trap, hoping to win back her love, if he had lost it, or to persuade her to give him her reasons, if he was to lose it. In fact, to clear up the mystery of his misery and false existence.

A week passed, but Himm made no headway. His pent-up energy gave way to his morbid sensibility, and he was down with a high fever. Fortunately Himm had friends, whose timely assistance restored him to his normal health.

The next day, when he mentioned the fact to her, she questioned him with nonchalance as if enquiring into the ailment of a cockroach. She showed no sympathy, expressed no regret, never asked why Himm did not send her a message—she would have come out and nursed and cheered him in his loneliness! And yet Shahinda was a qualified medica, and professed to be attached to her profession because of her sympathy for human suffering.

Himm had no doubt that if he had been some poor forlorn wayfarer, Shahinda would have been as good as her word. But when Himm was concerned, how could she show her weakness to him!

The recital of this episode had no effect upon the company. Himm repeated his questions, and received the same reply. He announced his decision to return home the next day. He had come to stay with her for a month or two, but a couple of weeks had sufficed to shatter his dreams.

The next day came, when he was vouchsafed

permission to call and to take tea and leave. He begged for a private interview, but was dismissed with the assurance that if he turned up a few minutes early, he might be accorded that privilege. He did arrive a few minutes early, but found to his misfortune that other guests had arrived even earlier.

But this was his last day ! He decided to outstay the other guests. Two hours were spent in the usual tea talk, and though the conversation was not more enlightening or entertaining than at most teas, the company was mixed and educated, and many must have heard of Himm's brilliance as a tea talker—but he was unduly reticent. He felt bored at the gallery of faces, because he wanted to be alone with his girl. He was waiting for a last chance to deliver his parting shot before he went away.

Moments passed to him like centuries, and more than once he hinted that he would shortly be leaving Gulshanbagh.

However, soon after seven, the last guest had left. Even Dadanna had to leave, as he had some work to do. Himm then lost no time in opening fire.

"Shahinda, I have been more than a week here, my darling, but you have not given me even a few minutes to ourselves. Why is it so ?"

"I have a reason for it."

"What reason, Shahinda ? It is your reasons that I wish to learn. It is in order to learn of the strange change in your nature that I have been repeating my daily visits."

"You will learn the reasons by and by."

"But you promised to disclose them on the first day. Now I am leaving."

"Well, you can leave—you will know them by and by."

"But can I be sure that you love me still?"

"We women are not so fickle as you men think."

Similar questions and replies followed, till Shahinda remembered that she had an engagement. Hasty adieux were spoken. Shahinda stood beside Himm and kissed him warmly.

She promised to see him again in a few days, and he was pleased.

It was clear to Himm that nothing would induce Shahinda to reveal her thoughts, or to remove the barrier which she had placed between their intercourse. It was only a few months ago that he had felt himself and Shahinda as the heavenly twins. He was now a discarded toy which had ceased to charm, but had commenced to worry her mind. He was like a blown balloon with which the child had played. It had burst, and was now only to be trampled under foot and put out of sight, lest it should recall the amusement which it had ceased to yield.

Such an experience was novel to Himm; it wounded his sense of self-respect. He tried to persuade himself that the strange metamorphosis in Shahinda was as sudden as it would be short-lived. He waited for some days, but he waited in vain. If he had lost his self-respect, he had equally lost his self-consciousness. Even his memory of the joyous days of the past seemed to prick him as if by a sharp piercing bodkin. Her eyes had ceased to be expressive, but had become unfathomable in

their mysteriously repellent stare. The sweetness of her countenance had turned into a waxen mask of suppressed emotion and subdued reserve. There was no hope of making that figure melt, he could think of no strategy to undermine that fortress, which failed even to give him a moment of enlightenment; he was so lamentably inexperienced in the mysteries of the human heart. He would go home, crestfallen and dejected. There was nothing else to do.

## CHAPTER XXVI

### UNTANGLING THE SKEIN

Himm returned home more perplexed than ever. During his stay with Shahinda—or rather his search for Shahinda—he had been plunged into the divinely increasing torments of anxiety and confusion, owing to the studied reticence and calculated insults of his chosen divinity.

This woman would neither break with him, nor was she anxious to placate him. She was just enjoying the fire of seeing him worrying about her. If he showed the least resentment, she instantly quietened it by out-manceuvring him. Her words at parting seemed to have been part of a set speech, fraught with oracular ambiguity. He was still her friend, and he must come again and see her in a few weeks' time, when she was to take a holiday. He must, however, be guarded in his dealings with women.

All this was spoken in a few seconds, and as it was the only thing Shahinda had spoken to him during the momentous week, he read into her remarks words of reconciliation and even encouragement. But when he was by himself, he began to analyse their meaning, and found in them nothing to encourage or to comfort him.

Himm reflected that if Shahinda was still his friend, what could be the meaning of her insults?



If she wanted him to revisit her, what had she done to make his present visit pleasant. Himm had no doubt that Shahinda was playing with him, but what were her motives? He would much like to discuss the matter with someone, on whose judgment he could rely. But he understood, as part of his compact with Shahinda, that their secrets should not be divulged to anyone.

It is true that when Himm once reminded Shahinda of this, she exclaimed: "I have given you none of my secrets, and as for yours, how do you know that they have not been divulged?"

This statement added one more tangle to the mystery, but after reflection, Himm devised a plan. He would ask an opinion on a stated case, without taking anyone into his confidence.

He invited his friend De Morgan, the philosopher, and stated the case, with the same particularity and detail as a conscientious solicitor states his case to eminent counsel.

De Morgan contracted his brow, threw away the half-burnt cigar, lighted another, changed his chair for a lounge, and after giving his new weed several hysterical puffs, opened the court by giving his verdict—*cherchez la femme*.

"So then, some woman has been poisoning her ears against me. But I know of no woman capable of doing that."

"Women are capable of anything."

At this moment, Mr. Yusef disturbed the confidential confabulation.

Yusef was a mutual friend, and a gay man about town. He had read for the Bar, but had failed to secure his admission. He had been gallivanting

with the fair sex in England, was reputed to have made many conquests, and was in fact treated as quite an expert doctor in love diseases. De Morgan had jerked out his verdict without much thought, and now buttonholed Yusef on the point.

"Yusef," he said, "I have a curious problem before me. It comes to me, by the way, as professional business."

De Morgan was a barrister of the *podrida* type, acting as the family friend of his clients, advising them upon all matters, looking after their children, their marriages, and taking charge of their litigation.

"What is the problem?" queried Yusef. "You must be quick, for I have to go soon."

"The problem cannot be stated in a hurry. It concerns a woman," added De Morgan, with a leer.

"Well, then, tell us all about it."

"The question is this—A loved B and B loved A. That is the major premise."

"Then B left A's station for a while to go to C, where she met D, with whom she felt in love," added Yusef.

"Yes, she did, but in a different sense. She loved A differently from D."

"In what way?"

"She treated A as her lover and D as her father."

"Yes, but what difference does that make?"

"D was an old man."

"But old men can be wicked," chuckled Yusef.

"B called him her Daddy."

"Well, she could not call him anything else. B was living in a closely guarded *zenana* compound, where male visitors are not allowed to stay overnight.

How could B keep D, without passing him off as her father ? ”

“ But no one was deceived by it,” said De Morgan.

“ What is your suggestion ? ”

“ This, that if she wanted to carry on with D, she would not have done it so openly.”

“ That is when it arouses the least suspicion,” remarked the experienced Yusef.

“ But B told A all about D. She told him before he came, that he would meet D.”

“ She told him nothing but what A could have found out for himself ! ”

“ If you suggest that B yielded up A, for the sake of D, I can’t believe it. I know B too well to entertain any suspicion about her loyalty to me,” remarked Himm unguardedly.

“ In what way is she bound to be loyal to you ? She said that she loved you, without obligations. That does not prevent her from loving anybody else.”

“ But her love for me was to be exclusive and personal.”

“ In that respect D now has the advantage of you.”

“ How,” demanded Himm.

“ Well, she loves D as her own father, and you merely as a friend.”

“ Yes, but our friendship is of the platonic type.”

“ It may be. The question is one of degree. How is her love for you different from her love for D—that is what I want to know. If it is not different, her greater love of D cuts you out. That is all.”

"Then, in your opinion, B insulted me, because D has taken my place in her affection?"

"No, he has taken more than your place in her heart. Otherwise she would not have insulted you."

Yusef was a specialist in this line, and De Morgan had to bow to his superior wisdom. But he was not convinced that Shahinda could have jilted Himm for the sake of D. He was not able to reason out this conclusion, but it was still his final verdict.

Himm was none the wiser for this conflict of verdict.

Yusef was *au fait* with such affairs, and had taken a complete stock of the situation. He realised that Himm's attachment to Shahinda was ethical. Their friendship was intellectual, their love platonic. Though in its highest sense spiritual, and to that extent real, platonic love endures only so long as love of another quality does not cross it.

He argued that the woman loved Himm, but later contracted a similar love for D. So long as the two lovers remained of the same quality, they could co-exist; but since D's mundane delegations altered its character, D's love weakened Himm's.

Himm, it was true, had striven to serve Shahinda, but he did not know how to do so. He had bungled. This gave D an advantage and Himm had to chew the cud when he tried to draw upon it.

Yusef decided that he would put this theory to the test. He was stationed two days' journey from Shahinda's town, but the adventure was worth it. He would try to introduce an element of reality and zest in the phantom fancies of the lovers.

On reaching his destination, he lost no time in securing a mutual friend to introduce him to Shahinda, for Yusef had never seen her before. They talked about the weather which was then at its worst.

"What brings you to Khushkpur, in these dog days?" asked Shahinda.

"The most urgent of calls," replied Yusef.

"How long are you going to stay here?"

"That depends," added Yusef.

Shahinda had evidently asked these questions in order to extend to him her hospitality, which she did by asking him to tea the next day.

Yusef accepted the invitation, and was scrupulously punctual in meeting his engagement. He found himself surrounded by a mixed company, including "Daddy." He noted that Shahinda went out of her way to show him marked consideration, and that she was playing the "child" to perfection—though the part was at times overplayed.

Yusef took tea and asked Shahinda to go for a drive, as it was cool out of doors. Shahinda hesitated for a while, then asked her Daddy whether he felt like going for a drive. Daddy was undecided, which left the matter to Shahinda's decision.

Yusef was a notorious lady-killer. He was jogging along in his profession by means which the leaders regarded as distinctly shady, and he was living beyond his means. He had been married by his parents a quarter of a century ago, had several grown-up children; but Yusef was free to marry Shahinda if he chose. So also was Himm.

Yusef led the fair doctor to his taxi; D followed, and the car drove off to a nameless place. Yusef's

talk with Shahinda was general; but, by his tone and manner, he impressed upon her his prepossession.

The drive was long, and brought them to dinner-time, so Shahinda naturally reciprocated the favour by asking Yusef to stay for dinner, which was all that Yusef wanted.

Yusef's stay to dinner was naturally followed by an invitation to smoke in the garden, and in the gloaming Yusef sang to Shahinda one of his gazals on the Beatitude of Love.

Shahinda was fascinated by the accomplishments of the young libertine. She requested him to sing another, and yet another, till the evening passed into night, and Daddy, who took no interest in these things, retired, leaving the two alone on the lawn. Yusef asked Shahinda if she was feeling sleepy and was anxious to retire, but either from conviction or conventionality she said that it was too hot to go to sleep.

The fact is that the accomplishments of her newly-acquired Troubadour had struck her fancy. It had supplied her with a change from the humdrum engagements of her daily life. The songs of Yusef awakened in her a new source of enjoyment. He kept her amused till a late hour, and as he was about to part, he seized hold of her hand, and gave her a parting kiss, which she only feigned to resent.

The ice was broken, and Yusef's visits became frequent, his stay after an invitation was even longer. His songs now were accompanied by the guitar—which, for convenience, Yusef left in Shahinda's sitting-room.

When Himm had visited Shahinda, she professed

to be too busy to meet him. Now that Yusef had come, all Shahinda's vaunted business vanished. She no longer asked her Daddy to join her in the sitting-room—Daddy's love was purely spiritual ! Love of another quality had mastered it, for secret assignations were made, and Yusef and Shahinda were known to take moonlight walks on the solitary moor, or watch the effect of light and shade from the interior of the mouldering monuments of antiquity.

When Yusef felt himself firm in the saddle, he asked Shahinda, on one such night, if she knew Himm.

"Y-e-s," drawled Shahinda. Did she like him ? The reply was yes, but only for his intellect.

Yusef was adroit. He did not pursue the same subject for long, but by dexterous interludes of a similar kind he had no difficulty in ascertaining that Shahinda's love for both Daddy and Himm was platonic, and that, as Yusef's more manly love forced its way into Shahinda's heart, the ethereal passion vanished.

Himm was not able to see Shahinda, though he urged his suit for a week. Yusef was never out of her sight, though he had been a complete stranger to her only a week before. Having made his conquest, Yusef said adieu to Shahinda, promised to be faithful to her, to write to her, and to revisit her within a few months.

On his departure Shahinda sobbed and wept, because her lover was tearing himself away from her.

"Oh, the joy of being with you, Yusef !" she exclaimed.

"Oh, the heaven of your eyes !" rejoined Yusef.

## CHAPTER XXVII

### CHERCHEZ LA FEMME

WHILE Yusef was busy courting Himm's sweetheart, Himm was spending sleepless nights in agony at Shahinda's cruelty.

His agony was enhanced, because her cruelty was designedly calculated—for which she promised to give the reason, though in fact she never did so.

Himm was a social reformer, and a leader of the feminist movement. He had a few politically-minded friends, and one of these was an old lady who had become his political disciple.

In his desperation, he approached her. He had promised himself that he would betray no secret, so he clothed his narrative in the garb of a fable.

But old Mrs. Murphy was not to be caught napping. She guessed that it was a love affair, though she did not at first realise, or indeed ever believe, that it was a love of any but the ordinary variety.

Himm had some trouble in explaining to the old dame the meaning of spiritual love. She smiled doubtfully and said, "Leave that love alone. It is for the angels, not for men."

But Himm was a doctrinaire. He really be-



lieved in the possibility of a close spiritual sympathy between two persons. He did not see why casual care should dilute so noble a conception.

But the old Irish woman who had seen much of the world was still incredulous. She was a highly educated woman, had taken a degree in classics, had served as Inspector of Schools, mixed freely with all kinds and conditions of men—had been thrice married, and had in consequence a numerous progeny. She was now old, and had settled down in the country which she loved so well. She had purchased for herself a home on one of the most romantic slopes of the Himalayas, from which she looked down upon the ignoble strife of man.

When Himm felt the want of intellectual company, he was always welcome at the Murphy cottage, and there he went to relieve himself of his mental tension.

Mrs. Murphy had known Shahinda for several years. Himm's story was, therefore, nothing new to her. She had, moreover, heard of Yusef's escapade, of which Himm was ignorant.

Himm asked Mrs. Murphy—whom he jocularly called "granny"—to tell him why he had been so insulted. The granny replied, "Because you insulted common sense." This was a clincher, but it was true. Himm was beginning to realise this, but he went on.

"The girl still professes to love me. She has invited me to her holiday home at Nilapahar."

"Yes," said Mrs. Murphy, "she still treats you as her second string. The fact is, Yusef is now her prime favourite, and both you and D. are only make-weights. Not that she does not care for you,

for she does, but her interest in you is æsthetic, in Yusef real."

"But she told me that she does not want to marry at all; otherwise I am willing to marry."

"When she told you that, it was true, but now she does. Yusef has given her the foretaste of marriage."

"If she wishes to marry, I have a prior claim."

"There can be no priority in marriage. He marries first, who marries last. You have still a chance, but Yusef has the first refusal."

Himm's grievance was still more aggravated by Yusef's treachery. He complained to De Morgan, but he only laughed. All was fair in love and war!

But Himm was not easily pacified. He still clung to the belief that Shahinda meant all she had promised—that she still loved him, and that her recent neglect was only in the nature of a lovers' quarrel, to add zest to love romance. He would write to Shahinda, and ascertain for himself the true facts. He then penned the following letter to her :

"MY DEAR SHAHINDA,

In the Shahzadi garden, in the presence of God and His archangels, our knot was tied and witnessed by all the starry firmament. You promised to be eternally faithful to me, and, of course, I to you. Our spiritual union created a relationship far more lasting than human marriage. Your soul, Shahinda, and mine were united and wedded into one. Therefore you became me, and I you. But only a few months later, when this new union was put to the test,

you scorned its name, denied its use, yet acknowledged me as your beloved friend. Only recently, when I came to you, I found you wholly changed. You denied me even the ordinary courtesy of an interview. You kept me waiting upon you for a week, after which you gave me a few hurried minutes of a roadside interview, in which you reaffirmed your love to me. Now I wish to know what sort of love it is, since you no longer care even to see me, and when I ask you the reason, you say that you have several, and will certainly disclose them to me; yet when I ask you to do so, you put me off with evasive replies. Now, Shahinda, please do not dissemble. If you love me, say so. If not, don't fear to confess it. As for the reasons, there can be only one. Has some other man taken my place in your affection? If so, why don't you own it? You are morally bound to me, but, Shahinda, don't lead a double life of falsehood and deception.

Your lover,  
HIMM."

Some time later he received the following brief message :

"MY DEAR HIMM,

Your two letters to hand. I have not changed, but want you to change your ways. I have to go to my work, hence conclude this in haste.

Yours affectionately,  
SHAHINDA."

“ I have not changed ! ” How could she say so ! How could she say so when he had to recall the past, to believe that the Shahinda of to-day was the Shahinda of the old days ?

“ Change your ways ! ” What ways could he change, when his ways were straight and rooted to the rock ?

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### YUSEF'S LIES

ON his return from Shahinda, Yusef had not cared to meet Himm, and now he was trying to avoid him. Himm was naturally anxious to meet Yusef, as Mrs. Murphy had informed him of Yusef's visit to Shahinda. After waiting a few days, Himm could no longer resist the temptation of bearding Yusef in his own den.

He asked him a straight question : " Have you been to see Shahinda ? "

Yusef began to prevaricate. " Not exactly."

" Very well, what are the facts."

" There are really no facts," added Yusef—which was true, since he was constitutionally incapable of distinguishing facts from his own lies, with which he was accustomed to tint even the least controversial of facts.

Himm was quite powerless to extort from Yusef even an admission that he had seen Shahinda. He knew that De Morgan had some influence over Yusef, so he confided to him all he had heard about Yusef's doings. Himm did not mind that Yusef had visited Shahinda, but what he minded very much was that he might have further poisoned Shahinda's mind against him.

De Morgan took occasion to meet Yusef in a

confiding mood. In fact, Yusef was pluming himself upon his success in having captured the adorable Shahinda for himself. He told De Morgan of his visit to her. Shahinda did really love Himm, but she was the worshipper of his intellect, and not the adorer of his frame. Her love for him was purely altruistic and ethical. She had been secretly married to Himm in the Church of God, but the consummation of their marriage was only possible in Paradise. The process had begun, but it takes æons for two souls to get assimilated thoroughly.

Shahinda still loved Himm and she would die loving him. But the quality of her love being ethereal, it did not produce any effect upon the physical plane.

Yusef found a virgin soil there, and he urged his own suit, which appealed to her lower nature. He let her higher nature alone, for that had been sufficiently exploited by her relations, both real and quasi, including Himm.

Yusef was not a believer in the transmigration of souls. He believed in a single life, and wanted to make the most of it.

As for Shahinda, she had no fixed beliefs of her own. She believed, with Himm, the fascinating doctrine of the immortality of the soul, its assimilation of other souls allied to it by spiritual affinity, and their relative position in the cosmos.

These exalted doctrines appealed only to the few; the many scoffed at them. But to those to whom they appealed, they were a more living reality than their own physical existence or well-being. To them, the truth of human existence was presented in a new light; to them, the accepted human in-

stitutions had no meaning. To them, the reality of the conventions was a hollow bubble ; the morality of the market-place was as a mask.

The ethical principle was not applicable to the multitude, but a principle which counted the power of the freedom of will and the supremacy of the individual. To them, man's freedom consisted not in a weak compliance with time-worn shibboleths which had descended to him as a result of confused thought, clerical tyranny, and social inertia, born of mass conservation. They yearned to live a more spacious life, a happier life, dependent upon the free volition of the parties.

To them, true marriage meant an alliance of the two souls, allied and assimilated by natural affinity. No coercive power of society was necessary for their continued union. As man was free, so was woman. Why should they barter their freedom for a mess of pottage ? Marriage was universally denounced as a lottery, yet society clings to the old institution, because it is afraid of a change.

The masses cannot think ; the masses will not think ; they are little distinguishable from the brute creation who live their little lives and die.

Himm was a social iconoclast ; he had striven to purge society of all its wrongs, to free it from all its accustomed thralldom—to remove its hallucinations, and base it upon the foundation of reason, rationalise its compacts, revise its restrictions, emancipate its slaves.

But it was a great task, and for that task Himm required the guiding hand of a thoughtful counsellor. He had discovered in Shahinda an uncut diamond—a diamond which, when cut and ground

and polished, its face burnished by the hand of the skilled craftsman, would shed a radiance and a light which would penetrate the innermost caverns of society.

A beginning had to be made, and someone had to make it. Man was a social slave; his power of initiation—his driving force and striking power—was hedged round, curbed, and controlled by the combined influence of the Church, the Court, and the proletariat. How long would man be content to live and die in the midst of such awful surroundings ! How long would he fail to exercise his wonted power. How long would he be a willing sacrifice, driven to the altar by the vampires of dark ages ?

These were the ideals of Himm's golden dream. He imagined building for himself a city of God, set upon a hill, the rules of which denied no one his liberty, but supported everyone in his effort to put forth his best human endeavour. He would convulse society by his neo-gospel—if only he could find a willing coadjutor, one to share his views and urge him onwards in his mission. Such a coadjutor must be a woman, for it was the woman who had been trampled down by man. All his laws were man-made, all institutions devised to subserve his pleasure and promote his pursuits.

Himm was the child of light; Yusef was the child of darkness. While Shahinda was the playground, De Morgan was, in a way, the keeper of the ring.

Yusef confided to De Morgan that he was himself sweet on Shahinda, that she had taken kindly to him, that he had prosecuted his suit with all the vigour of a trained cavalier, and that the only doubt



Shahinda had in her mind was whether her obligations to Himm would permit of her accepting Yusef as his substitute.

Yusef had told Shahinda that Himm's love for her was spurious, that he was equally pledged to other women, and that in his discreet disguise of a polished gentleman lurked the heart of a Don Juan.

Shahinda had readily believed this; because someone had told her of Himm's friendship with Roshnara, whom Shahinda knew. Roshnara had confessed to Shahinda about Himm's approaches to her, and Shahinda had trusted her, as it had never crossed her mind that the woman might be lying for her own ends.

With all this information in his possession, Yusef began to work out his plan of campaign to capture the heart of Shahinda. He had promised to write to her, which he did. He had promised to revisit her—which he had still to do. Their correspondence was one of growing warmth and cordiality, while Shahinda's letters to Himm were becoming more vitriolic in their tone, and savoured of gall and wormwood in their temper.

If Himm had been a scheming man, there was a scheme ready to his hand. But his behaviour towards the fair sex had always been strictly correct, and though he took special delight in intellectual company, he took no pleasure in that company if it was not refined.

As for his relationship with Shahinda, he loved her for her own sake, with all his might and main—but in loving her, he equally worshipped her. He was quite conscious of her infirmities, but he made

light of them. All lovers believe their inamorata to be divine—he was one of them. The person they love is an ideal fictitious person, possessed of qualities which they find centred in the woman of their choice. Lovers are the votaries of idols, who prostrate their bodies before them, believing in their divinity and centring in them all virtue and power. The idol may be only a shapeless cobble or a hewn monstrosity, a carved ape or a blackened demon. But the devout worshipper sees in it nothing of ugliness. He makes his prostration before it in all seriousness; such faith does not merely affect the heathen—it inspires equally the Christian, the Moslem, the worshipper of one God and of all gods.

A similar devotion affects the lover. He believes his sweetheart possessed of all the virtues of a Diana, all the beauties of Venus, all the wisdom of Minerva, and all the virtues of Lucretia.

In his amorous devotion, he does not believe his lady mortal. When the time for disillusionment comes, it is often too late. But while the religious or amorous frenzy lasts, the devout worshipper, as the devoted lover, is the pitiable object of credulity, make-believe, and superstition.

Yusef had all along maintained that, given a man and a woman together, their intimacy was one for fair presumption. He could not believe that friends of the two sexes might be intimate, without being suspect.

In a country where women are kept in the house, as luggage, in darkened rooms, and are moved about in packing-cases, such a suspicion is natural. The freedom of Indian women is still

to come. Their education has not proceeded far enough to make their voice clamant. There are certain communities who have adopted western ideals of life, and Shahinda belonged to one of them. She was herself brought up in Europe and had brought back with her the free air of Europe. Her ambition was fired by the easy lives which she had seen her western sisters leading. Consequently, she was more manly in her receptions than most men of India. She would consort with men with a freedom which took away the breath of the Indian Mrs. Grundy. Yusef knew this, and made the most of what he had seen in his short sojourn at Shahinda's city.

He first put Himm in a receptive mood by evincing his own reluctance to be communicative. He then let fall suggestive hints, and began to make insinuations, which Himm warmly repudiated.

He then produced Shahinda's letter, in which occurred the word "affectionately." Yusef read the contents of the letter which he would not show, but Himm was unconvinced. Yusef gave up the front attack, thinking it safer to launch a flank attack through De Morgan.

De Morgan was a Frenchman, naturalised in England. He was in the middle forties and a confirmed bachelor. He complained that marriage, as an institution, should have been abandoned with the crusades. He was for free love, and believed in the emancipating influence of Platonism.

But in other respects he was an arrant conservative. He was a high churchman, read lessons in church, was regular in his attendance, and was

regarded as a pillar of clerical orthodoxy. He had developed the fascinating hobby of gardening, and was a constant visitor to Himm, who also possessed a large garden, and, by the way, maintained a sumptuous table.

## CHAPTER XXIX

### HIMM'S DILEMMA

SEVERAL months passed, and Khichdipur had forgotten that Himm had a friend in Yusef. The latter ceased to attend his office regularly, and when he did so, he confined his calls to business.

Shahinda was no longer mentioned between them. Himm had, in fact, passed to Yusef a hint that he did not care to allude to the subject. Shahinda was maintaining her correspondence both with Yusef and Himm; and this Yusef knew. He was, therefore, more than curious to know what developments had taken place in Shahinda's relations with Himm.

One afternoon, at the tea-hour, De Morgan dropped in at Himm's, and taking the latter aside, asked him if he had heard the latest?

"Shahinda has eloped with D.!"

"How do you know?" asked Himm.

"I have heard it on the best authority," replied De Morgan.

"But who is your authority. Not Yusef, I hope?"

"No, someone far more reliable."

"Can't you give me his name?"

"No, I am pledged not to do so."

"It is strange that you should hear of it before Yusef or myself."

"How do you know that Yusef has not heard about it?" asked De Morgan.

"If Yusef had known, he would not have failed to inform you of so sensational a bit of news," replied Himm.

"As a matter of fact, Yusef left last night for a destination unknown. It may be that he has gone to Kamalpur."

"But he has just sent me a note, dated this morning, that I was to accommodate him in one of his cases, as he has been taken ill."

"It may be so. Yusef may be here—or he may be lying. I will enquire."

"So will I!"

Himm lost no time in sending his secretary to inquire about Yusef's whereabouts. His clerk told the messenger that Yusef was in bed, as he had contracted sun-fever. The secretary reported this to his master, and an hour later De Morgan sent in a chit to the same effect.

His version was confirmed by a note, subsequently received, in Yusef's own hand, requesting Himm's good offices in accommodating him with a loan of fifteen hundred rupees "for the marriage." Himm was a good-natured friend and a good lender. He sent him a cheque for the amount, enclosed in a note, saying, "Herewith my congratulations."

The marriage Yusef referred to was that of his daughter, which he had long been contemplating, but which had to be put off from time to time for various reasons. A fortnight or so before the

request, Yusef had mentioned it again to Himm, and had suggested a small loan for the purpose.

Himm had lots of friends at Kamalpur to whom he could wire for information, but his loyalty to Shahinda would not permit of his taking a course which might lead to the wagging of tongues. He decided to wire to Shahinda herself, enquiring where she was and how she was feeling.

There was no reply, but Himm was not surprised at this, for Shahinda was a bad correspondent, and not a very relevant one at that. She was by nature deep and secretive, and would not give out news which had already become public property.

Himm did not know what to do. Should he risk another trip to Kamalpur, and ascertain the true facts for himself, or should he await the turn of events, and give his patience a trial? The situation was puzzling enough, but after reflection, he decided to start and see things for himself.

On his arrival at Kamalpur, the first thing he did was to 'phone up Shahinda. Someone at the other end replied that she was not at home. He asked when she was expected to return, but his interlocutor did not know.

Himm took a taxi and boldly went to Shahinda's house. He found the main gate locked. He sent his servant to crawl through the iron bars and enquire of the servants the whereabouts of Shahinda. The man found the servants' hall deserted. The house was locked, while an enquiry from the neighbours, passers-by, and the quidnuncs, revealed nothing pertinent to the quest.

Himm was at his wits' end, and did not know

what to do. He decided to question the Principal of the Institution, who informed him that Shahinda was out on a short casual leave, her whereabouts being unknown, but the lady added that it might be that she had gone to see her people.

Himm began to feel that his adventure was a wild goose chase, when a happy idea struck. There was in the college a friend of Shahinda, who often visited her and was to a certain extent the participator of her confidences. Himm went to Mani Bai, for such was her name, but the woman gave a smile when questioned about her friend. She was evidently in her confidence, and declined to split on her friend.

Shahinda could not have travelled without booking her berth in the train, so Himm made enquiries, but only learnt that a couple—Mr. and Mrs. Yadgar—had booked their passage in a carriage for Bucknow. Himm sought to obtain more particulars from the clerk in charge, but the man who had made the booking was off duty.

According to the hospital report, Shahinda had left on casual leave on May 19th. Casual leave is limited to ten days, so in the ordinary course she was due back on the 29th. This was the 21st. Was he to await her return?—well, he had no alternative. But who were the Yadgars? He did not remember having heard the name.

Yusef might have assumed that disguise for travelling purposes, but there was nothing to show that he had even left Kamalpur. All clues being unavailing, Himm had no alternative but to wait, and wait he did till the 29th, on which day he hurried to the hospital to enquire about Shahinda's return.



The Anglo-Indian matron curtly replied that she had no news about Dr. Shamir.

Himm then called at Shahinda's house, but it was still deserted. His patience was now exhausted, so he booked his berth for the return journey. He was anxious to satisfy himself that he had searched for his girl till the very last minute, so he took a taxi and drove again to the hospital, where the assistant on night duty showed him a wire, which read as follows :

“Detained by illness. Apply month's leave.  
Writing. Shahinda Shamir.”

The wire was dated from Bucknow. It was, therefore, clear that Shahinda was there, but as she had applied for leave, it was not likely that she would stay in Bucknow, for the summer heat was notorious. He decided to await the arrival of the application, but what was there to show that the application would give her future address? The probability was that it would not do so.

He hurried back to the station, and took the night train to Bucknow. He knew that Shahinda and Mabel were great friends, but Mabel was in Mussourie. However, there must be someone at Mabel's to give him the desired information.

Himm found her house deserted. The heat of the plains in India drives its well-to-do occupants to the hills, and the plain cities of India are, in the hot months, as much denuded of their fashionable population as the inland towns of Europe, the inhabitants of which go to the watering-places.

But though Mabel's house was deserted, she had left a chowkidar and a sweeper woman. The former was asleep, but the latter was sweeping the road.

Himm questioned her about Mabel, and was told that she and her friends had left for Mussourie the day before. Himm asked who were Mabel's friends.

"One Sahib and one Mem Sahib."

"How old were they?"

"Not very old—middling."

"Was the Sahib country sahib or a European?"

"He was a very white sahib. He was a Bada Sahib. Gave me five rupees as baksheesh."

So the Sahib could not be Yusef!

"What was the Mem Sahib, country or English?"

"She, too, was English. She also gave me five rupees."

Shahinda was a brunette, but her five rupees had evidently made her English.

"Were there any other persons, besides your mistress and the Sahib and Mem Sahib?" he asked.

"Yes, there were two of their servants."

It was useless questioning the garrulous old woman, for she could not distinguish the moon from green cheese, and her idea of Sahibs and Mem Sahibs depended upon the amount of her *douceur*.

Now, it is a well-known fact that a stranger in India can have an audience for the asking. If your motor-car suffers a puncture on the road, it soon attracts a concourse of quidnuncs, who become intensely interested in the machinery of the car while your chauffeur is fixing the spare wheel.

If you lose your way, you will attract a crowd of street Arabs to give you the necessary—and much unnecessary—assistance.

Mabel's house was situated in the hilt of land reserved for Anglo-Indians, Parsees, Christians, and Westernised Indians. It was close to the Bazaar. The blowing of Himm's motor horn proved a tocsin call to the village urchins, whose juntos were hastily dissolved and reassembled around the car.

Himm asked the oldest of them whether he knew anything about Miss Mabel's whereabouts, to which the chokra promptly replied : " Yes, Sir, Mabel Missi Baba gone to Mussourie."

" Alone ? "

" Yes, she had guests, who have left for Naini Tal, Sir. They were married here."

" Married here, in Mabel Missi Baba's house ? How do you know ? "

" Everybody said so."

" But you did not see them getting married."

" Well, there was a big dinner party, of which all of us ate the offals. How can there be such a big dinner party in summer without a marriage ? "

" What were the names of Mabel Missi Baba's guests ? "

" I can't tell you, but the taxi-driver who drove them to the station can. I'll fetch him."

Salim, the taxi-driver, had really driven them to the station, but it was all a yarn that they had been married at Mabel's. They were already married when they came to Bucknow. They were Mabel's guests, and she gave them a bridal banquet. Their trunks still bore their old names—one bore the name of M. Yusef, another was S. S., or something like it. Salim described the couple all too accurately, so that there could be no doubt as to who they were.

Himm felt dizzy. He told his driver to drive

on. The man drove on and on till he reached the outskirts of Bucknow.

Then he stopped and asked Himm how much farther he wanted to go. Himm had no idea. He had dropped on to the cushion of the car, and was unconscious.

The driver turned the car back and stopped at the nearest hospital !

Himm was well known, for his photographs had adorned all the illustrated periodicals of the day. The doctor, Babu, felt his pulse and found it quick. He had received a sun-stroke, and was admitted into the indoor ward.

## CHAPTER XXX

### HIMM AT THE HOSPITAL

FOR two days and two nights Himm was unconscious. On the third day, there was a change in the weather, heavy clouds and thunder marking the advent of the rain, which tempered the heat of the day. At four o'clock a sharp downpour cooled the air, and this had an immediate effect upon Himm, who turned on his bed.

"Shahinda, where is Shahinda? My dear, beloved, darling Shahinda. Shahinda! Shahinda! Shahinda!"

The nurse telephoned to the House Surgeon, reporting that the "Big Patient" was getting fits of delirium. He was making strange noises and calling to someone who wasn't there. The House Surgeon, Mr. Dube, a clever and clear-headed doctor, hurried up and applied his stethoscope to Himm's heart, marked its thuds, tapped and squeezed him all over, and then prescribed an awful decoction, which sent Himm to sleep.

He woke up the next morning and again cried for his Shahinda, with whom he entered into a long, imaginary talk. He was aware that Shahinda was not there, but he believed that her Ego was with him, watching over him, easing his pillow, comforting and caressing him.

To him, Shahinda had split herself in twain—the psychic Shahinda was his, and had always been his, ever since his spiritual wedding. The visible Shahinda was playing pranks with her own soul; when she was in union with it, Himm was her all in all! When she fell out with it, she indulged in vagaries which made Himm smile, and at times grieve.

But to Himm, the inner Shahinda mattered—the outer Shahinda was a mere perishable shell, subject to decay and death. It was volatile, it was wayward, it lost control, and like an unruly colt, she took the bit between her teeth and bolted anywhere, till her movements were controlled again by her judgment.

Himm had heard of Shahinda's marriage, of the wedding feast; he had followed them in their honeymoon. Where was she, he asked. Shahinda the real, spake not, but smiled and said: "Always with you, my darling." But the real was imprisoned in the material, and overweighed by the load of social conventions. She had to recognise the social ties, enact the social lies, conform to the social wants, and obey their mandates. She did not believe in her soul's freedom, and dared not trust her better judgment. Her advisers were men of the world, and, worldlings as they were, they drew their inspiration from their coarse material environments.

Shahinda, the inner and the outer, had worn the white flower of a blameless life. It grew in whiteness when it was linked to Himm. Its whiteness might fade, but would not vanish so long as the soul exercised any control over the body. It was to prevent that mishap that Himm was anxious. He

knew Yusef, knew his antecedents. He was anxious to warn Shahinda against him.

He took a hurried discharge from the hospital, and the doctors advised him to go to the hills. They feared that the burning heat of the plains might entail a relapse.

But Himm was prepared to take that risk.

## CHAPTER XXXI

### IN PURSUIT OF HIS DREAM

HIMM now took a little time to collect his thoughts. He had already ascertained the whereabouts of Mabel, but Salim had told him that Yusef had gone a different way. There was no clue to Yusef except through Mabel. He knew her well, she liked him; he would therefore make for her.

Mabel was a nice girl. But this common compendious expression is as vague as it is replete with meaning. "A nice girl" to Himm had a different meaning from that which it would have to most men. To the man about town, a girl is nice if she makes a congenial companion. To a man of Yusef's type, a nice girl implies a flapper. To Himm, Mabel was nice, in the sense that she was well balanced in her life and judgment—thoughtful in her acts, agreeable in her manners, practical in her wisdom.

Mabel and Shahinda's lives had run in even courses. They were both of about the same age. They had both been to Europe to complete their education. They had travelled on the Continent to expand their experience. They were both careful observants and discreet in their dealings with men. They were both pretty, but beauty had not touched their vanity. They knew that beauty was



but skin deep, and that it fades like the daisy before it opens its petals.

Like Shahinda, Mabel had taken a high degree, and had come out to the Motherland to be useful to her sisters. Mabel had taken an educational post, which she held on a pittance. She took it, because it was then the only means available to her for serving her country, the crying want of which was then, as it is now, education.

Mabel had lived with her parents, who were unfortunately carried off by the world-wave of influenza. She was left an orphan. Unaccustomed to live a lonely life, she shifted to the house of a friend, where she met her husband. The Singhs were a family of six, and its members followed various occupations. The paterfamilias, an old man of seventy, was a bookseller. His eldest son, Mahtale, had taken a degree, and had been appointed to a junior magistracy under the Government. He met Mabel, and the old man instantly laid plans for their marriage.

Mrs. Singh was a born matchmaker. It was she who paid frequent visits to Mabel, and induced her to abandon her desolate home and become a member of her family. She promised to treat her as her own daughter, though she was inwardly planning to make her a daughter-in-law.

Mabel was not a marrying woman, for she was quite happy in her spinsterhood. She painted and played, while her culinary accomplishments were the talk of the town. Being now nearing thirty-five, she was clearly out of the marriage market. Mahtale had been married early, had three children, the eldest being twenty, but he also had paid the toll

to the decimating epidemic, which carried off his wife.

Soon after Mabel had shifted her belongings to the paternal care of Mr. Bhor Singh, the latter began to pay marked attention to the young visitor.

Mrs. Singh was equally all attention to her.

Mahtale was holding a touring billet and was seldom at home. Then he was appointed to land-acquisition duty, which gave him only a couple of days every month to visit his home.

During these occasional visits, Mahtale saw as much as he could of Mabel, for he had heard of the parental solicitude for his marriage.

Mabel was spoken of as a likely match, and must have suspected as much. But her parents had only recently died. She was in public service—the fire of her youth had been mellowed by time. She had no particular desire to undertake matrimonial responsibilities. Moreover, Mabel wore on her neck an amulet which depicted her love romance. She too had loved—and lost—and she had decided to love no more. Years had gone by, but years had only deepened her determination, which had become rooted as a part of her unconscious self.

However, the covert references to matrimony reawakened her memory, and the old scene once more began to haunt her in her dreams. Her riverside idyll once more came to life, and brought in its train sobs, and sighs, and tears, idle tears of which she could not tell the meaning, memories of days which were no more.

But these haunting memories of her younger life merely stiffened her determination to remain true to the memory of one who had plighted his

love to her, but who, before he could make good his pledge, had joined the holocaust of the war.

As he lay bleeding to death on the wind-swept battlefield of Flanders, he wrote with his lifeblood his parting message. "Mabel, I die thinking of you."

These words were woven round her locket, and Mabel said bravely: "Yesterday is past; let us think of to-morrow."

But yesterday had not passed out of her mind; it had become enshrined in her heart. She lived for the morrow, but hoped that in the whirligig of time her yesterday would return to her—if not now, then assuredly hereafter. What happiness it would be meeting her first and only love in the Elysian Fields, long after the heat and dust of the world shall have worn down and cast aside this mortal coil.

Firm in this faith, and encouraged by this hope, Mabel had steadfastly discountenanced the overtures of numerous suitors. She was now past her prime, and she would not desecrate the memory of one whom she had loved so dearly, and whom she so fondly hoped to meet again.

Such was Mabel when she had joined the Singhs. Twelve months of residence with them had, however, sufficed to alter her outlook. As she was constantly reminded of marriages and the danger of spinsterhood, her faith in her own ideal was shaken. She met Mahtale month by month, and began to think more of him than of the ideal in her mind. The picture of one was vivid—of the other faint. The one could be seen—the other could only be felt. But the conflict between the two emotions was tormenting her mind.

Mahtale was not an intellectual prodigy, but had read well, memorised better, and relieved his reason of the ordeal of evolving a new thought. After his land-acquisition work was over, he allowed himself a month's holiday, which he decided to spend at home. The climate of Baikunthpur was then ideal. It was cool, but not too cold, and the lawns and the lakes were brimful of winter beauty.

On one of their excursions, Mahtale and Mabel struck a specially delicious spot. It was one of those mountain rills which gently murmur through the glades of the sylvan solitude. Sitting by the crystal water of the falling cascade, with their heads towards it, Mahtale asked Mabel whether she ever thought of changing her single-blessedness—to which Mabel promptly replied, "No, not of late."

"Why not?" queried Mahtale.

"Because I have no reason to do so," added Mabel.

But this had been before Mabel's outworks had been stormed. Once her will was weakened, the rest was easy. Friends and visitors spoke of Mabel's solitary life; they suggested that Mahtale was likely to make a good husband. The grass-hopper takes its line from the grass on which it feeds. How could Mabel escape the force of her environments? Her will was overpowered, a marriage of convenience was arranged and contracted. Mabel lived with her husband for six months, then she packed up her belongings and left for her home. She never met Mahtale again.

Different persons gave different reasons for this estrangement, but Mahtale professed not to know

why his wife deserted him, while Mabel was reticent when questioned about it.

As already stated, she had entertained the Yusefs, and was now taking her holiday at the chalet in Mussourie.

Himm had not met her for several years, so his sudden appearance was a surprise to her. She knew that Himm was too busy to afford a holiday, and Mussourie was the least likely place for him to take it.

Mabel was entertaining a party of friends when Himm arrived. She excused herself, and ushered him into her private room; she asked him to take a wash, gave him tea, and then gently questioned him as to the purpose of his visit.

Judged by this light, though Mabel and Shahinda had been brought up together, the one was a paragon of good manners, the other of ill manners, so far as Himm was concerned.

But perhaps in this, as in other cases, too much familiarity had bred contempt. Mabel knew of Himm's relations with Shahinda, and after the necessary preliminaries were over, she was the first to question him whether he had met Shahinda of late.

At this, Himm could no longer control himself. He told Mabel that he was after Shahinda, who was last seen with her. He asked her to give him the details of her marriage and the destination of her honeymoon—at all of which Mabel was surprised and shocked, for she protested that she had not known that Shahinda had married or that she had gone anywhere for her honeymoon. Himm jogged her memory, and asked her whether she had not

given them a wedding dinner. On hearing this, Mabel burst into a fit of hilarity, and asked Himm who had been giving him those fables.

Himm was not the least surprised at this attitude. He thought that Mabel was purposely drawing enquirers off the scent.

"Is it not a fact that Shahinda stayed with you in May last, immediately before you left for this place?" he asked.

"Yes, she dropped in at my house one afternoon."

"Was she alone?"

"Yes. Who would be with her—poor thing!"

"Was she not in the company of a gentleman?"

"No, certainly not."

"Did not any gentleman come to see her, or you, while Shahinda was staying with you?"

"Several persons called. I do not know to whom in particular you are referring."

"I was referring to a man called Yusef."

"No. I don't think any person of that name called."

"Did Shahinda go away alone, or in the company of a gentleman?"

"Her brother came to fetch her. That is all."

"What is the name of her brother?"

"I don't know his name, but she introduced him as her brother, and called him Bhai."

"I wish to have a word with you in strict privacy," added Himm.

He spoke these words in a soft whisper, so as to convey to Mabel that the information he was seeking was strictly confidential.

Mabel gave a nod, and with that consummate tact, which would do credit to a general on the

battlefield, she disposed of her assembled guests without making them feel that she was in any way in a hurry. This was another contrast to Shahinda's clumsy ways, for she never found time to give Himm even a few minutes, though he had been kept on the waiting list for a week.

After the last guest had departed, Mabel called Himm into her back verandah, where they could watch the glorious panorama of eternal snows in the distance.

Himm did not know how to begin, but his method was always direct—to the point.

He told Mabel of all he had heard, adding that what he had seen confirmed his fears. He was sure that Mabel was in Shahinda's confidence, and next to Shahinda, she alone could enlighten him on the true facts.

After Himm had finished, Mabel enquired what it was to him where Shahinda was, or what she did.

"Shahinda is everything to me. I cannot live without her. She is my love! We are allied by the ties of platonic friendship, and she has vowed to me eternal fidelity."

"Well, then, you ought to be able to know all you want to know about Shahinda."

"I don't—that's why I have come to you. Let me put to you a set of questions."

Mabel was perfectly frank in her replies, but she must have known that they were formal and partial, and that they lacked the saving grace of conviction.

Himm made no secret of what he had been told—what he was deeply anxious to know was whether Shahinda had really married Yusef, where she was,

and with whom. The replies Mabel gave were mostly non-committal and wholly insufficient to satisfy him. She stared straight into Himm's eyes.

"Mr. Himm, can I trust you?"

"Most certainly, Mabel."

"But how can I trust you any more than Shahinda does?"

"I did not know that Shahinda mistrusted me."

"Men are too obtuse to know anything, I suppose."

"I have never betrayed anybody's confidence so far, and I don't see why I should possess the devilry to betray yours."

"But if you did?"

"Then you need not trust me any more!" he retorted.

"There would be no further occasion for it."

"Look here, Mabel, there is something very mysterious about you which I cannot understand. You have teased and tortured me—quite unconsciously, I grant—ever since I came. You know that I am worried about Shahinda, but you do not give me any clue."

"Haven't I just given you a good clue?" she asked.

"What clue? That she does not trust me is no clue at all to her whereabouts."

"Well, if you don't think so, I can't help it."

"Mabel, don't tease me unnecessarily. Do be explicit. I cannot understand covert allusions—I want everything to be made clear."

Himm confessed that he was beaten and admitted that he was at the chalet as he could get no clue to



Shahinda's whereabouts. He would hold Mabel's secrets provided she helped him with Shahinda.

But Mabel was not so easily baited. She stipulated that he must help her in an affair of the heart, if she gave him a clue to Shahinda's whereabouts.

Himm was equally concerned about Shahinda's marriage, as to which Mabel would make no promise—though she went on assuring him that Shahinda could not have been married, because she was precluded by the rules of her service from contracting a marriage—which was neither here nor there.

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## CHAPTER XXXII

### MABEL'S WOES

MABEL was prepared to tell very little beyond a clue as to Shahinda's whereabouts.

Two years ago, she had had septic poisoning, whereupon she went into hospital. She was in constant communication with Himm, but her own address was "C/o Boyd's Bank"—though Himm was dying to meet and nurse her, and be handy in her sickness. This was Shahinda's display of her vaunted independence.

Mabel knew as much about her friend as Shahinda knew about Mabel, which was not much—but it was knowledge of a character not confided to a mere man.

Mabel was pathetically discreet. Though she had agreed to impart to Himm the information about Shahinda's whereabouts, she was not prepared to give any hint on the vital issue which was the main purpose of his quest.

She gave him an address, and Himm thought it would be a good plan if Mabel accompanied him. She had already yielded to some extent; she might be a little more accommodating. He asked her if she had any business in that direction. She understood, but would not agree to accompany him to her friend at the present juncture.

Himm had no alternative but to make the most of the information he had got. He hired a pony and rode ten miles up hill and down dale, until he came to a small, shady amphitheatre, made by the surrounding oaks. Here was a lonely house, situated in a valley, in a desolate waste, where the sun could never have brightened its battered walls.

Shahinda loved show, and could not have selected it from choice to be her lodge for the honeymoon. Himm first tried the front, but received no answer. He then tried the side and then went to the back—still no answer !

He was wondering if the house was tenanted, but he found some of the windows open, and a dilapidated old servant sunning himself and leisurely smoking his hubble-bubble.

Himm went up to him to ascertain the names of the tenants, first asking if anyone lived in the house. The answer was in the affirmative. He asked the names of the inmates, but the old man did not know. When did they come into the house ? He could not say, as he was merely the chaukidar (watchman), and his duty was to watch the house and not its inmates.

But the inmates must eat, protested Himm. They must have at least a personal servant or two to act as factotums. Where were they ? Where was the kitchen ? There was indeed a kitchen in the compound, but it had come down and could not be used.

Himm wondered whether Mabel had given him a wrong address. He took out his note-book and re-read the name of the house : “ Ravenscroft.” It was clear enough.

It was possible that the pair might have sauntered into the wood, for he knew that Shahinda was fond of the open-air. But where could they have gone? The house was built in the valley, and one had to mount five hundred feet at least before negotiating its flanking range. There were two ranges on either side, and without a guide he might venture on the one, and miss his quarry on the other. He would try the door, and if it yielded, he would walk in and reconnoitre the interior. He pushed and the front door yielded. He walked in, and found himself the lonely occupant of a tiny sitting-room. Wondering what next to do, a welcome sound appeared to come from an adjoining room.

Presently a khitmatgar appeared and requested Himm to excuse his mistress for a few minutes as she was dressing.

The mistress then was in the house. Minutes passed, and in his suspense Himm could hear the beating of his heart.

At last Shahinda appeared, but as she was about to cross the lintel, she hesitated, pulled the purdah with her hand, and shouted for "dearie" to come out. The dearie from inside gave an approving response, whereupon she ventured into the sitting-room and stood in front of Himm, cold and motionless.

Himm advanced to greet her, whereupon she coquettishly held out the forefingers of her hand, but pushed it back, lest too much of it should move forward.

He expected that she would have the courtesy to ask him to sit down, but she did not do so. All the time, her eyes looked scared, and were moving

restlessly in the direction of an inner room where "dearie" was supposed to be.

Himm asked Shahinda who was the stranger in the house, to which Shahinda replied, "He is not a stranger. He is my brother."

"But you never had a brother!" he retorted.

"I have adopted one. What does it matter to you?"

"Shahinda, it affects my position with you. I have come all this way to see you, yet you look cross and snappish."

"Why have you come?"

"Did I not say that it was to see you?"

"Well, you have seen me!" she retorted.

"But I want to have a chat with you, as of old, and in private."

"Dearie, dearie, are you coming?" she cried.

A man then entered, and proved to be no other than the unchanged scoundrel Yusef. He tried to show some courtesy, but what Himm wanted at that particular moment was his absence.

In case he might show himself accommodating to his senior and former chief, Shahinda, with love-lorn glances and captivating smiles, began a talk in which Himm was ignored.

She suddenly remembered that dearie had had no tea—that he wanted to smoke. So she cleaned his pipe, brought out his tobacco tin, a light, and made a cup of hot tea.

Then glancing at Himm, she asked if he would have something to drink.

Himm's passion was now thoroughly roused.

"No, thank you," he exclaimed, the meaning of which was fully understood.

Yusef told his "darling" that he had an engagement for a few minutes, and left the room, followed by Shahinda, hanging on his sleeve, purring and pressing close to him at the thought of parting.

Himm was left deserted in the room. But Yusef advised her to show better manners, so Shahinda shambled back, and no sooner had she sat down than she announced to Himm that she must leave him, as she too had an important engagement.

"What has become of you, Shahinda? You don't seem at all pleased to see me." Shahinda made no reply.

"I wish to put a few questions to you. Will you reply?"

"What are the questions?" she asked cautiously.

"Have you got married?"

"Is that the only question?"

"It is the most important, but there are others."

"What are the others?"

"First reply to that question. I will then put the others to you."

"Well, what do you think?" she replied.

"From the love you are showing to Yusef, it seems to me that you are more than married to him. You are his slave."

"But in our service we cannot marry. Moreover, I don't care to do so."

"Then what is this?"

"You see me and my brother here."

"Now, Shahinda, don't dissemble. Didn't you and your so-called brother travel together by the night train from Kamalpur, as Mr. and Mrs. Yadgar?"

"Who told you so?"

"No one told me, but I draw my own inference."

"Well, you are now seeing the Yadgars. You have come to see me, I suppose."

"Yes, but are you Mrs. Yadgar? Is it not a fact that you have been secretly married to Yusef, on condition that you should continue to serve in your maiden name, but that when you two are in married life, you were to pass as Mr. and Mrs. Yadgar?"

"You possess a lively imagination, Himm. How can I marry my brother?"

It was useless going any farther. Shahinda clung tenaciously to her view that she had adopted Yusef as a brother, though she would not explain her clinging attachment to him, nor deny that it had affected her relations with Himm.

"Do you still retain for me the same love?" he asked.

"Certainly! I am not fickle."

"But am I to believe your words—or your actions?" he retorted.

Shahinda had evidently forgotten or missed her important engagement, for, as she was getting restive of further straight talk, her "dearie" returned from where he had hidden, overhearing the talk as he confessed afterwards to Himm.

He coughed and suggested to his "darling" a stroll in the woods. Without turning to Himm, even to fling a good-bye, Shahinda squeezed Yusef's hand, and sallied out of the room, when Yusef reminded her that he had forgotten to bid farewell to Himm. They returned.

"How long are you going to stay here?" asked Yusef.

"As long as necessary."

"Well, if you are staying, why not call again to-morrow at five and stay for dinner. We have no cook, except Shahinda, but I daresay she will be glad to cook for you as well."

"I will gladly cook for you, and Himm can join," put in Shahinda.

"I suppose there will be enough for all of us."

Himm was not to be insulted like this. He thanked Yusef for his hospitality, and promised to call, but declined to dine off Shahinda's table.

Shahinda wanted to cut off Himm's visit of the next day, so she told her "dearie" of the important engagement she had made with her aunt—she had to pay an overdue condolence call.

Yusef examined the fixture, and found that the tea would fit in equally with the funeral, at which Shahinda tamely but reluctantly yielded.

But as Himm departed, she did not fail to add that he might not find her at home, as she had other engagements of which she had lost count.

Himm offered to take his chance, but Shahinda recounted her engagements, after having shifted her own seat to the arm of the chair upon which Yusef was seated.

Perched upon this vantage ground, she stroked Yusef's chin, pressed his cheek, pulled out his pipe, to see whether it needed replenishing, tried to replenish it—then, remembering that all this love-making might prolong Himm's stay, she pushed the pipe back into Yusef's mouth, and suggested an adjournment to the garden.



Yusef was beaming with delight at his sister-wife's attention, but he had not the courage to leave his guest in the lurch. The next day's engagement had been settled, and he wanted to invite Himm to dinner.

Shahinda was a wayward girl—if that term might pass for a woman on the mature side of thirty, but she was sweet as a turtle-dove, gentle as a lamb to Yusef.

"Darling, do you really mind if Himm comes and has pot luck with us to-morrow?" Yusef asked.

"I don't mind at all, but I fear I shall be away. But you can dine with him, and I will get the food ready."

"But he has come all the way from Kamalpur to see you. You should be hospitable to him."

"I have been hospitable to him. What more does he want? Do you want to dine with us to-morrow night, Himm?"

Himm was forced to give the only answer possible. He had not come to eat, but to see Shahinda on business. Yusef felt that Himm's tactlessness had cost him a dinner with Shahinda, but he could not help him any longer. So he bade him a courteous adieu, and requested Shahinda to see him to the gate.

Shahinda would not budge without her "dearie," so Himm hastened out of her presence, and wept the scalding tears of disappointment.

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## CHAPTER XXXIII

### MABEL'S MISSION

HIMM retraced his weary steps to Mabel, who greeted him with all the wealth of a woman's geniality. She read in his face distress and disappointment, of which she had a foreboding. She had warned Himm that Shahinda might not be at home and that he might fail to find her. Her fears were, however, allayed when Himm told her of his visit.

Mabel questioned him closely on the details of his excursion, and her womanly instinct promptly told her that she was right. Himm had not found Shahinda, and would not have seen her but for Yusef. It was he who had driven her to observe the ordinary rule of civility. If left to herself, she would have turned Himm out of her sitting-room, but it would have compromised her implicit obedience to her brother.

Himm recounted the substance of his talk with Shahinda, to which Mabel listened with assumed composure. He told her how far he was committed to a further visit and sought Mabel's advice.

Mabel was a woman who understood women. She had seen the world, watched its panorama and viewed its kaleidoscope, observed its vagaries, mocked its vanities, and shared in its good things.

She had been a sentimental woman in her earlier years, but now her brain saw clearly the pretence and hollowness of human life.

Mabel was one of Himm's admirers, but her admiration mingled with her pity, for she could not understand how such a stalwart champion of women's rights did not understand women. He regarded them as belonging to a special creation, and placed implicit confidence in their judgment. He endowed them with the superlative qualities of truth, righteousness and justice. He looked forward to the day when man would be ennobled into a woman, and woman, already perfect, would pass out of the plane of humanity, and be ranked amongst the angels of Heaven.

Shahinda had deceived him, and had taken to lying. She had degraded herself from her pure virgin throne, to an ambiguous and impure life. But he did not, he could not, believe in her sudden downfall. He could not realise that the purest of souls have at times yielded to the tawdry temptations of the world. In spite of the insult to which he had been subjected by her, in the presence of her paramours, he never for a single moment lost confidence in her. Nor did he doubt that her flirtations with other men were merely the acts of a simple nature, which appeared suspicious, but were in reality frank and thoughtless.

"Do you think I should have stood this treatment from any other woman?" he asked.

"Only women can treat men so," replied Mabel.

"Not all women!" he retorted.

This was the truth—who but Shahinda could have treated as dirt the foremost figure of the day?

—who but she could have refused to offer him a crumb of bread?

This was Himm's view, not Mabel's, and though she refused to permit any allusion to her friend, she gave Himm a lecture on the cruelty of woman.

"Have you not read," she asked him, "that in the old gladiatorial contests, it was the women who held their thumbs up not to spare the life of the vanquished gladiator? In the Spanish bull-fights is it not the women who urge the toreadors to entrail the dying beasts? Of all the murders that have been committed in the world, of all the blood that has been shed in battles, how much has not been shed in the cause of woman? Shahinda likes tormenting you because she loves you—she wants to know how much of it you can bear. She will not dismiss you from her sight, for that would spoil her sport. She takes special delight in carrying on with her so-called brother, and others, because she wants to tease you, and the more you feel teased the more she will do it. I do not say that it is all make-believe, but if she did not want to tease you, she would not behave so outrageously in your presence. If she had loved you less, she would have been more discreet. She would not have carried on like that before you, if she knew that it did not hurt you."

"But why should she try to hurt me? I have done her no harm," protested Himm.

"I did not say that she was trying to hurt you. I was merely describing womanly nature, and used Shahinda for a text."

"Then how can a man know a woman's real mind?"

“Get a woman to read it for him !” she retorted.

Himm jumped at the suggestion, and wanted to depute Mabel to do this duty.

Mabel was willing, but she named a price which Himm might not be in a position to pay. If the price had been payable in current coin, Himm would have experienced no difficulty for he was wealthy, and money was as dross to him. The price Mabel named was in the shape of service, which Himm might not be able to render.

However, he assured Mabel that he would have tried in any case, but now that she had given him the added zest of a return benefit, he would try all the more, if this were possible.

Mabel promised to lift the veil, and let Himm see Shahinda as she was. She would clarify his vision, correct his rose-coloured ideals, and if the reality did not appeal to his sentimentality—well, he would have learnt the truth.

This was all Himm wanted. He was dying to know Shahinda as she was, and was anxious to solve the mystery of her marriages and adoptions. What did she mean by tying the holy knot with him? What did she mean by appealing to his exalted morality? How did her promises consort with her conduct?

But the task which Mabel had assigned to him was an impossible one ; still he would try to serve Mabel, and not cease studying Shahinda for himself. He would, therefore, go to Shahinda's and at the same time get ready for action in Mabel's case.

The task Mabel had assigned to Himm was this. She had had her love romance, but it was over. She had settled down to a life of spinsterhood till the Singhs had decoyed her into matrimony. The

Singhs were plain matter-of-fact people, and believed in the marriage of their son as bringing a voluntary drudge into the household.

Mabel thought that a popular institution, such as marriage, must also be a pleasurable institution, an idea of which she was very soon disillusioned. No sooner was she married and inducted into the family, than she was regarded as part of the household chattel. The patriarch expected her to attend to his petty comforts, the mother-in-law exerted her proverbial authority; the children regarded the newcomer as their nurse, the husband as his cook.

Mabel had been brought up in an atmosphere of luxury and refinement, but her marriage had cast her into a den of perpetual bickerings, jealousies, and unrelieved monotony. The husband was a crudely hewn creature, early yoked to the official chariot. He had no moments of leisure beyond what he could snatch from his masters. Those moments he spent in the company of his cronies, playing bridge, or indulging in idle and stupid pastimes.

Mabel had asked herself again and again if this was marriage—that institution hallowed by the barbarism of the age? Where was the freedom of man or of woman? If marriage were a contract, why should not the parties be free to make or dissolve it? That very freedom would ensure their happiness, and be its cement. What right has the priest to say, "If thou dost wish to marry, come to me, or be damned"? What right has the State to say, "If thou dost wish to marry, go to the clergy, or be damned"? What right has the husband to say that now she is his wife, he would bring her back again if she escaped, just as he would his runaway

cow? What right had the parties to say that there should be no end to the union till either of them misbelieved?

Mabel had had no idea that any civilized society would tolerate such an outrage upon humanity. She had heard of the shrieks, groanings, and pangs of the victims of marriage; but she could not believe that marriage was an institution which entailed so much human suffering, which enslaved the whole of mankind, which placed one sex in abject subjection to the other, and both in abject terror of the pharisees of society.

Few people realize the wrongs and cruelty which it entails, the deterioration of the race which it ensures, and the suffering to generations yet unborn which it provokes. Human society cannot exist without marriage, but it must be an alliance and not a servitude. It must be a considered and a conscientious contract, between two persons, who must be left free to make or unmake it at will.

Such were Mabel's views, and she was prepared to suffer martyrdom for them. She was glad to be married, because everybody approved—but everybody did not witness the disillusionment. There was not only incompatibility of temper between herself and her husband, but he had treated her with affected regard in public, and unaffected indifference in private. In addition, she was subjected to petty tyrannies by the household.

Taken by themselves, and individually, her troubles were not serious; but when taken collectively, and employed continuously, they undermined her constitution and made a serious inroad upon her delicate sensibility.

Mabel had decided to return to her former duties, and pass the remainder of her life as a grass widow, but Mahtale would not permit this. He entreated her to stay and this was followed by menaces and threats, which culminated in a suit for her compulsory residence with her husband, failing which she would be consigned to prison.

The fiat had been given, and there was nothing but ruin and dishonour before her. The more the coercion of the law was put into force against her, the more her nature revolted against her having to live under the roof of her persecutors and share the bed of her tormentor.

Mabel was determined to resist the tyranny of this unequal law or die. She wanted Himm to help her, when her services would be unreservedly at his disposal.

At the moment, a warrant for her arrest was pending. She had tried to dodge it, but the hounds of law were at her heels, and what was she to do? She must either consort with the man she had begun to detest, or go to jail and live in the company of rogues and vagabonds. If she were driven to it, she would much rather be with the rogues than with her husband.

Mabel's story moved Himm, and he said that if there was any occasion to go to prison, he would rather be her substitute. But the laws were inexorable.

Now, the alteration of social law is no easy matter. In the Central Legislature alone scores of pious Bills are introduced, and are either strangled at birth or consigned to the lethal chamber of a Select Committee, from which they do not emerge, or are



so mutilated and mangled as to be past recognition by their own parent. Such is the fate of all social legislation, of which the restitution suits have the most ancient ancestry.

They affect all communities, European or Indian, Hindu, Mohammedan, Parsee or Jew.

In India, marriage is regarded as a sacrament, and in the case of the bulk of the communities, there are no means of dissolving it. The husband receives his wife as he would a lottery ticket. She may be fair or dark, an entire mismatch to him, but she remains. He may be blind, an idiot, or a consumptive. He remains.

The marriageable age has recently risen, owing to the reforming genius of a private legislator, but it remains deplorably low—fourteen ! The lives of persons so mated are bearable only so long as they follow their accustomed lives ! Education, though it is not making much headway among women, is a passport to public employment. It is taken advantage of by boys of the middle classes, whose sole means of livelihood is service. They are allotted haphazard wives, and when the pair grow up, and see more of each other, they realize their unhappiness. They feel that they have been sacrificed on the altar of custom.

Mabel did not belong to this class, nor did the Singhs. They were Christians—but Christian or no Christian, the East is the grave of reason. No persuasion will alter its manners, no example will modify its views. Its innate conservatism, buttressed by ignorance, has stood four square to any change. A cataclysm will not suffice—it has braved many of them. What will do good is the firm grip

of the reformer, who may drive a lonely furrow, but it would cut deep and bring a harvest which alone will change the unchanging East.

A hurried measure of the legislature abolished the imprisonment of women as a penalty for refusal to return to the husband. It was brought into force on the critical day when Mabel stood before the myrmidons of law, ready to be plunged into prison or dragged by the husband to his lair.

Himm appeared in person, and the Court was crowded to suffocation. By one stroke of his pen, he cut the fetters away from Mabel's feet, and she was free to go wherever she pleased. She could not be imprisoned—the law could not hold her to her misery !

It was difficult, even for Mabel, to realize that she was free. It was impossible for her to believe that the misery which had been shadowing her, and from which she had been fleeing, had ceased to torment her. She sobbed and cried out of gratitude to Himm, and promised every assistance in his quest.

Time is the great healer of all wounds, and time had assuaged Himm's sorrow. The paroxysm of his first disappointment was passing away, but there still remained the pleasure of pursuit. He had saved Mabel from a whelp ; he would save Shahinda from a hound.

He discussed his plan of campaign with Mabel, but before launching into action, he felt it his duty to try his own unaided persuasion, and test its power.

## CHAPTER XXXIV

### AN UNINVITED TEA

HIMM went again to Shahinda, and this time Mabel accompanied him. It was unfortunate, for as soon as Shahinda espied her friend, she thought it a good pretext to convert her bedroom into her reception room. She called her in and sent Yusef out.

This may have been done on purpose, for Yusef was now in want of funds, and wished once more to draw upon Himm. He therefore had to be specially affable, and to Himm, affability with reference to the immediate object of his quest meant a full disclosure of facts.

Himm asked Yusef if he had been married to Shahinda. Yusef swore to the contrary, and said that he had been "adopted" as her own brother, and was playing the part.

Himm asked whether Shahinda had not travelled as Mrs. Yadgar, and he replied that he had so booked their seats, but that at the last minute Shahinda had changed her mind, and they had travelled in different compartments, when they had no need to keep to their assumed titles. However, he admitted that he was courting Shahinda, but she had taken time, to see more of him and overcome her disinclination to marry.

Yusef's version belied every testimony of the eye,

but Himm could go no further. Yusef suggested that Shahinda was merely playing with him, and that she felt grievously hurt over something which she would not disclose.

Himm asked Yusef why she had delayed, and he replied that Shahinda was suffering from a return of septicæmia, which she had contracted two years ago, and was undermining her system. There was not much doubt about this, as Himm had seen Shahinda ageing before his very eyes. She was now run down by disease, and her body emaciated by its insidious action.

But to Himm Shahinda was Shahinda—young or old, healthy or diseased—for his relation with her was intellectual. He would enjoy her society so long as she was alive. When she died her soul would still become assimilated to his, and there would continue the same communion of spirits which no disease could weaken, no death destroy.

As Yusef's palm had been sufficiently greased, he was now as anxious to procure the presence of Shahinda, as, to do him justice, he had been previously anxious to avoid an open rupture. He called her, but received no response. He then tapped at her door, whereupon the women remembered that there were other people in the house. They finished their talk in whispers, and then adjourned to the sitting-room where Himm stood up to greet them.

Mabel was all smiles, and would have kissed Himm a thousand times in the presence of everybody, but Shahinda was moody and more stand-offish than usual, though she was even more demonstrative in her affection for Yusef.

She commenced wooing and cooing egregiously, and Mabel—who found herself seated beside Himm—whispered, “That is not like brother and sister,” with which Himm fully agreed.

Shahinda made herself so busy with Yusef that she forgot the existence of everyone else. Two more guests dropped in, and the company become more mixed, but her behaviour was no more discreet. She was singing the song of “Dearie,” which made them wonder whether she was qualifying herself to play the fool.

Himm was dying to have a word with Shahinda. His heart was swelling with questions which she alone could answer, with doubts which she alone could resolve. Shahinda had been so friendly before, that her presence had become a necessity to Himm. He could not exist without her. It was not necessary that she should always be with him, though he wanted it ; but what was necessary was that she should be available at his call. It gave him an added power.

But Shahinda was now trying to avoid him, and when he was about to take up her challenge and moved to go, she showed her dislike. She was a tyrant who wanted to tease unceasingly, but was afraid of losing Himm.

Mabel had all along sympathized with Shahinda, but now she felt outraged at her indiscretions. According to her views she went beyond endurance in her coquettish pranks with Yusef, and equally so in her trifling with Himm’s feelings.

Himm was torn by two conflicting emotions—was it the last straw, or could he still bear another ?

Shahinda at times deteriorated to gross vulgarity,

and was coarsely rude in her insults. But Himm bore it, only passing to her a timely warning that she was forgetting herself. It was, however, clear that, so long as Shahinda was in Yusef's toils, her intoxicated vision could not see straight. Himm's plan was to remove her from Yusef.

## CHAPTER XXXV

### MABEL COURTS HIMM

MABEL had now seen for herself the doings of Shahinda. She had openly sympathized with her, and explained away every foible of hers as natural to a woman of her age, subject to the periodical attacks of hysteria.

But after her return from "Ravenscroft" her attitude changed. She had always liked Himm, who had equally liked her. She was an intellectual woman, and the intellectual bond counted with Himm. But he was a rank conservative in his affections.

Mabel told Himm that, while she had been glad to go to Shahinda, she wished now that she had not gone. She could not bear to witness her unseemly behaviour towards Yusef, and her wantonness towards Himm. But she added with suppressed venom, "Much must be forgiven in a sickly old woman."

Mabel was of the same age, but considered herself as in the prime of life, though she was not prepared to give the same credit to Shahinda, because she was sickly.

But to Himm, Shahinda had become doubly dear since her sickness. Again and again, he advised her to give up service and take a long holiday in Europe.

He was prepared to see to it all. But Shahinda was a "proud pauper," and would not hear of these well meaning but necessary overtures. She would continue to drag on as long as she could, and when she broke down, someone would have the compassion to bury her bones. Such was the trend of her mind.

Himm was anxious to reclaim her out of her pessimism, for he felt that Shahinda's life was now bound up with his own. He could not conceive of the possibility of a severance between them.

Mabel was now trying to play for her own hand, and conceived the brilliant idea of arranging a picnic, to which Shahinda was bidden. She would show, under the greenwood tree, her magic of cookery, her versatile attainments.

The party was small and select. Yusef was not there, but a stranger took his place. He was a tall, well-groomed man, and something of a dandy, who spoke with affected intonations, and seemed to regard himself as the beau-ideal of the place. Himm was a boxer, a man whose physique and form was a pattern to the painter, but he treated all physical accomplishments as negligible and of no account. He was a confirmed votary of intellect, and intellectual company gripped his mind.

Mr. Gammon stalked into the encampment, half an hour late, apologized for the delay, as he had been detained by the General, who had insisted upon his staying for breakfast. He rolled out his innumerable engagements, gave the company to understand that he was a man of much importance, and that it was an act of condescension that he had strayed there to patronize their party.



Mabel treated him with marked deference, Shahinda with indifference, for she was a sensible woman and did not care for show. This was her forte, and it was what bound her to Himm.

Mabel's younger sister named Georgette, a romping hoyden still at school, was immediately attracted to Mr. Gammon.

Georgette eyed the dandy with gaping admiration, and Shahinda, mischievous as ever, took hold of the lapel of Himm's coat, and commented upon its quality.

"Look at Mr. Gammon," she said. "He looks every inch a gentleman."

"Then adopt him as another of your relatives," Himm replied.

"Yes," retorted Shahinda, with a merry twinkle in her eye, "I have still a vacancy, and I might as well fill it."

While these sallies were engaging the picnickers, Mabel was busy accomplishing her culinary feats.

A gentleman by name Mr. Mervin happened to be passing that way. He was a professor in some college, who was having a short holiday in the hills. He knew Mabel and she invited him to an alfresco lunch under the canopy of heaven. Mervin had no particular engagement, and accepted. He was introduced to the company, including the great Mr. Gammon, who nodded condescendingly upon the professional bookworm.

The green sward, with the overhanging shade of the oak, the pines and the Spanish chestnut, the cloudless sky with its deep ethereal blue, added to the pleasure of the company, and had even a melting

effect upon Shahinda, who began to feel herself again.

She enjoyed the scenery, she liked the company, she had Mervin to talk to, Himm to tease, and Gammon to joke with.

Mabel noticed all this, and felt somewhat uneasy that the incident of the previous day might be atoned for. She was finishing her *pièce de résistance*, but turned to Shahinda, regretting that Yusef was not able to come.

Shahinda joined in the regret but said no more. She was pickling some other rod for Himm—it did not matter whether it was Yusef or Mervin.

After lunch, when the smoking was over, Shahinda suggested a stroll, and selected Mervin for her partner. But she did not want Himm to be out of sight, so she asked him to follow her, which he promised to do.

Mabel told Georgette to follow her, and keep in Mr. Gammon's company. Someone was left in charge of the commissariat, while Mabel walked by Himm's side, emulating the example of Shahinda with Yusef in the drawing-room.

Himm did not know if it was in Mabel's mind to arouse Shahinda's jealousy, but that was the effect.

Shahinda began to retaliate, by behaving in a "don't care" style with Mervin, which must have shocked the staid professor. Mabel was feeling an inward satisfaction that her friend was smarting under her whip. She had been playing the tyrant unchecked, but now she had met her match, and Himm was a pawn in the game of these scheming women.

Mabel had now taken a rooted dislike to Shahinda, against whom she wanted to be revenged. Himm knew this, because of her attitude. Only a fortnight before, she had been her champion and apologist. Now she was her most severe critic, though she still professed to be friendly with her. She had told Georgette, and the flapper thought it good fun to repeat to Mr. Gammon all Shahinda's real or assumed physical defects, which did not concern Mr. Gammon. But he was warned that Shahinda had a swarthy skin, a scarecrow figure and a diseased constitution—though why all this was necessary to regale a summer afternoon in Sowbena, one does not know. Even her character was not above suspicion. She was spoken of as a woman with a past—while her numerous “adoptions” were instanced as proof alike of her madness, and of a method therein !

Mr. Gammon heard all this, and gave his opinion that Shahinda was a black sheep.

Mabel was more cautious. She tried to poison Himm's ears against Shahinda, and was now watching him closely for its effect.

Meanwhile Shahinda was carrying on in her nonchalant way with the professor of philosophy.

After wandering through the wood, and being sated with the scandal, the hosts and their guests took tea. Shahinda had now come over to Himm's side. Little did she know what Himm had to bear on her account. He was subjected to a frontal attack by her, and to a flank attack on her account. But he still clung to the woman of his choice, and wrote on a tablet his own pent up feelings :

Shahinda, your love has left me ;  
It did not last e'en a day,  
Shahinda, why is your heart so fickle ?  
It has stolen my heart away.

## CHAPTER XXXVI

### MABEL DISCLOSES A SECRET

THE end of the picnic left a sting.

Mabel was not the same as before. She had quietly studied the situation so far as it affected herself, and she laid her plans. She was not going to play second fiddle to anyone, least of all to Shahinda, and the confidential *tête-à-tête* in the bedroom had shown Shahinda as secret as the sphinx. She would disclose nothing to Mabel as to her relationship with Yusef. She denied a marriage, but did not go very far in her confidences.

Shahinda confessed her lingering love for Himm, though he already had a rude awakening to the contrary. Mabel wanted to oust Shahinda and take her place, and decided to use Yusef as a tool.

Yusef had no definite intentions of any kind—he had gone on the spree, which he loved, and found Shahinda handy. He was fond of women, but any woman was good enough for him, provided she was passably prepossessing and reasonably responsive. He had looked at Mabel and thought her equally eligible. But his heart went for her pretty sister, Georgette, who was sparkling with the sap of youth.

The other women—well, they were past their prime, and Yusef was a connoisseur of female beauty.

Mabel's plans were involved, but they seemed to work well judged by their results. As she had given a picnic, it was evident that Shahinda also would follow suit. She had then to decide upon her plan of action. She took Georgette and Mr. Gammon to the Yusefs—for this was how she described them—when Shahinda proposed an outing to the falls. She said that they would find sufficient shelter in the ruined abbey if it rained—of which there was some likelihood.

The date of the picnic was announced, but Shahinda had confided to Mabel that it might have to be postponed if her "dearie" was to undergo an operation, as in that case it was her duty to be by his side and nurse him.

Himm asked Mabel what operation it was, and why it was necessary for Shahinda to nurse him. She replied that her friend was very secretive in these matters with her, and would not disclose anything ; but that it was obvious that, in proffering her services, Shahinda might be seeking the triple rôle of mother, wife and friend.

Primed with this information Himm questioned Shahinda.

"Is your picnic fixture coming off?" he asked.

"What makes you ask that question?"

"Only because there is many a slip."

"Yes, you always count on them!" she retorted.

Himm was savage at Shahinda's evasion. He was thoroughly sick of her habit of refusing to answer any question if she could avoid it. In this respect Mabel was straightforward. She had her reservations, but she was open in intimating them.

Himm cancelled another engagement in order to

join the picnic. He was preparing to go, when he received a short note—not from Shahinda, but from Mabel, stating that it had been cancelled. Mabel did not give the reason, but Himm had no difficulty in guessing that it must be the impending operation.

Mabel wrote to Shahinda, enquiring if this was the case, and whether she could be of any use to them. She received a short hurried reply that Mabel need not trouble to come.

The operation dashed all Himm's hopes of meeting Shahinda for an indefinite period. He dared not refer to it with her, since it was one of Shahinda's confidences to Mabel.

He asked Mabel to enquire how long she would be detained by the operation, and how long it would be before Mabel would be able to see her. Messengers were sent with enquiries, but returned with the reply, "Darwaza Bund" ("Not at home").

The two decided to beard the tigress in her den, but she was not there. The house was locked! The inmates had left ten days ago, on the day of Shahinda's picnic, to a destination unknown.

One question which had been worrying Himm was Shahinda's attachment to Yusef—and another was her singular conduct towards himself. It was evident that Mabel was in a position to make a shrewd guess, if indeed she was not in possession of the true reasons. She had at one time implied as much, and had even been on the verge of imparting them to Himm, when her mind took a sudden turn, and she modified her plans.

Shahinda's grievance appeared to be that Himm had been neglecting her; but when, and in what way, Mabel could not tell. Now when two people

are friendly, and all the more so when they are intimate, a charge of neglect can be made easily and plausibly. The question is simply one of degree.

Himm had ransacked the entire storehouse of his memory for any striking example of his neglect. He found a hundred or more such instances, any one of which might furnish a cause to an overstrung mind.

Meanwhile, Shahinda was vouchsafing occasional replies to Himm's letters, couched in her usual strain, perplexingly vague, bewilderingly ambiguous, and incredibly irrelevant. Shahinda had coined a code of her own. What she wrote may have been intelligible enough to herself, but it was wholly unintelligible to Himm. Whenever he complained to her about her vagueness, she felt startled, as if the clearness of her written thought was in question. But her spoken thoughts were identical, so that it was only by chance that Himm was able to divine her meaning. Yet some meaning she must have attached to her words, for at times she wrote long yarns, and these could not have been spun without fresh material.

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## CHAPTER XXXVII

### SHAHINDA'S LETTER

ON reaching home, Himm found a letter decorating his tray. He looked at it upside down to read the postmark, which was blurred. He tried to decipher the date, but it was equally blurred. The exterior of the letter gave no idea as to where it had been posted. Its interior turned out as he had expected, for it was dated, 15th June, "c/o Boyd's Bank," her usual address when she was moving about, or had any reason to conceal her whereabouts. The letter itself read as follows :

"MY DEAR HIMM,

I wonder if you are still at the 'Rockies'—if so, you must be enjoying yourself. The heat here is oppressive but I have to do everything I can to make Dearie feel cool. He is in such a delicate state of health that I have to be with him, nursing, night and day. I am not in the best of health myself.

Yours affectionately,

SHAHINDA."

Himm read it and re-read it, but he was none the wiser. The last time he had seen Shahinda was at her own house on the fourth of June. She had invited the company present to an excursion, and asked Himm to come also. The rest was a matter of

history—when, after waiting for several days, he had called, but she had disappeared as completely as if the earth had swallowed her.

It was clear that he must now settle down to life, effacing her from his memory. He could bear the suspense no longer. There were lots of clever women on earth, he consoled himself. Shahinda was not the only one, and there were many quite as good. Mabel was one of them.

If Shahinda persistently slighted and ignored him, boasted of her "dearie" before him, spoke of confidences which she could not impart to him, she might be the jewel of a woman, but she was of no use to him. This was, of course, his counsel of despair, for his mind was still yearning for Shahinda.

But his own health was showing signs of giving way. He was feeling that the substance was gone, and that he was merely pursuing a shadow. Still he loved to play even with the "will-o'-the-wisp," for it was better than nothing, though he knew it gave him a restless pillow and recurring nightmares.

Torn by such conflicting emotions, Himm made no decision. He let things take their own turn. His confidence in Shahinda was shaken, but not destroyed; his love for her was unshakable.

While living in this disturbed state, Himm saw the light from a quarter least expected.

Mr. Gammon, the dandy whose casual acquaintance he had made at a picnic, called on Himm in the company of the bright girl, Georgette. He stated that Mabel had arranged for a short excursion to the falls, and for want of time, she had deputed them to fetch Himm, as she was anxious that he should join the party.

Himm had packed and was ready to go, for he wanted to shake the dust of Mussourie from off his feet. He needed a change of scene, hoping to provide the necessary draught of forgetfulness for his addled mind. · Georgette took in the situation at once, with her finer perception. She said that, unless she chipped in—to use a slang expression—Himm might refuse, and Mabel had specially deputed her to prevent that contingency.

Himm accepted and went with them at once. They started in pairs, Mabel and Himm together.

As soon as the rest of the company was well out of hearing, Himm opened fire.

“Georgette told me that she wanted to give me some news,” he began.

“What news could it be, unless she referred to Shahinda’s letter?” was Mabel’s reply.

“So you have been a recipient of her favour!”

“Surely you have heard from her?”

“Yes, but it did not make me any wiser.”

“What does she say?” asked Mabel.

“That is the trouble,” answered Himm. “She says nothing.”

“Does she tell you that she is in hospital?”

“No. Is she in hospital? Which one?”

“Oh, down in the valley. It is more a nursing home than a hospital. It is run by that gentleman,” she explained, pointing to a bespectacled man moving ahead of them. “He is a very clever surgeon and a specialist in women’s diseases.”

“What is his name?”

“I forget, but Georgette knows it. Yes, now I remember it—Dr. Oldenburg.”

“How long has Shahinda been there?”

" I presume since you met her last."

" And she never wrote me a line ! "

" Nor to me either, unless you count her last chit."

" What does she say in it ? "

" Just this, that I was to invite the doctor, as he is a very nice man, and wants to make himself popular with the people. It was an introductory chit. That is all."

" No news about herself or Yusef ? "

" None whatever ! But Dr. Oldenburg has been treating both, and told me all he knew about them just before you came. In fact, your late arrival gave me a chance to talk to him."

" Did you write to Shahinda about this outing ? "

" I did but she refused, and the doctor said rightly, as she is ill, and the outing would have made her worse."

" Where is that scoundrel, Yusef ? "

" He is there too. I did not write to him."

" Why not ? He would have given you news about Shahinda."

" Not more than I know already." Himm pressed her to tell him all that she knew, had heard, or seen, about Shahinda.

" That is a tall order, but I will do my best." She gave Himm a garbled account of Shahinda's doings at the hospital, making faint but suggestive insinuations against her. She said that her " adoption " of Yusef was moonshine, and that she was leading an outrageously scandalous life, disgracing her sex and position. She added that Dr. Sandys would turn them out as soon as they were sufficiently convalescent. Himm felt that unless appearances

were deceptive, Mabel's account was borne out by the testimony of his senses. But he felt convinced that appearances were deceptive—though Shahinda took pains to show that they were not. He was confirmed in his belief from the fact that while Shahinda made much of Yusef, she made no effort to conceal the salient features of his life from Himm. On the other hand her letters were full of allusions to him, and her own obligations to him, his kindness, his indulgence, her devotion to him and their inseparable lives ever since she had met him. He was a demi-god, compared to whom Himm was a satyr. Himm was snappish ; Yusef, long suffering ! His was an example to follow, Himm's one to avoid. This had been the burden of her correspondence during the last few months.

But with all her infatuation for Yusef and his paragon ways, Shahinda would not completely break off with Himm, though in some of his letters he had invited the final word. Himm was now anxious to meet Dr. Oldenburg, and he had his chance. The doctor had heard all about him from Shahinda, so he was no stranger. Himm questioned Oldenburg about Yusef's operation, but the doctor treated it as a professional secret, and he would have done the same about Shahinda, if he had not been convinced that Himm was deeply attached to her. He confided to him that Shahinda was subject to nervous breakdown, and that in consequence she had contracted a rare disease known to the medical science as *Philophobia*. The etiology of the disease was still obscure but its symptoms were simple. The victim suffered from a haunting fear of enemies, amongst whom she included her best friends. As a

favourite dog when it contracts rabies tries to bite its master first, so does the victim of this scourge select his or her best friend.

The disease had long been known to medical science as a form of hysteria, but it had only recently been diagnosed and isolated as a special disease of the nervous system, calling for specific treatment. Dr. Oldenburg happened to have made of it a special study, but he was puzzled at the erratic course it took in the patient, making her do and say things so singular as to baffle the patience of the most careful physician. There was no cure for it except rest and change.

He had advised Shahinda accordingly, but she would not hear of it, for she was wedded to her work, which she could not leave. She was a conscientious worker, and when she worked, she would work like a demon, going beyond her daily routine and creating work when there was no necessity for it.

Himm asked whether he could see Shahinda, but the doctor replied that it would only make her worse. She should be left alone for a time. She might come round—he hoped she would—but she would never recover unless she gave up her duties and obtained complete rest.

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## CHAPTER XXXVIII

### SHAHINDA'S REST CURE

THIS was a revelation to Himm and an explanation of all of Shahinda's queer conduct for the past nine months. It was clear that Shahinda, a fragile girl, had never been in what might be called robust health. She had contracted septicæmia while at an operation, and it had resulted in the complete breakdown of her nervous system. She clung tenaciously to her duties, forgetting that discretion was at times the better part of valour.

The poison had filtered into the system and was slowly transforming her entire organization. She who had been perfection in her treatment of men, discretion to a fault in her deportment, became careless as her disease grew, and more and more hysterical. Himm had been her *alter ego*, and now became the quarry of her wrath. She took to making indiscriminate friends, indulging in reckless actions, which were symptomatic of her ailment.

As if moved by instinct, Himm had advised a complete rest cure with the result that she cut herself completely from him, and began to be known to him only in correspondence. She had immured herself in a place of greater security where she could nurse and aggravate her disease.

Himm begged, prayed, and pleaded to her, to take the only course possible, but it was all to no purpose. The disease had now entered its secondary stage. Her actions became more erratic and more impulsive ; she was restless and restive of restraint. She threw all discretion to the wind, and began to live a life which, it was clear, was the visible symptom of an internal trouble.

The disease had reached its climax when Shahinda first left her lover. Her elopement with Yusef was but another symptom of her growing neurasthenia.

Himm was more than ever worried about Shahinda, for the doctor had warned him that unless the patient was taken early in hand, she might develop a suicidal mania, and it was evident that if she could be induced to take a long rest, it was bound to be her cure.

But this was by no means an easy thing to secure ! It called for a mental therapy wholly out of reach of the pharmacopœia. Himm had his own idea of the cure, and he proceeded to put it into execution.

The first thing he had to do was to reply to Shahinda's conventional letter, which was in keeping with her other letters, chronicling the virtue of Yusef and her own devotion to him.

In his previous replies, he had made light of these references, taking them to be made so as to arouse his own pique, and with no object of belittling him. He now saw that this was clearly their purport.

“ MY DEAR SHAHINDA (he wrote),

I received your letter of 15th June. Yes, I am still at the Rockies, thanks to Mabel. I am thoroughly enjoying myself. In fact, I am going



to enter into the same bond of eternal friendship with her as I have done with you. *Au revoir.*

Yours affectionately,  
HIMM."

He had sent this letter by his "chokra," who returned with "Salaams." He had scarcely finished saying this when another "chokra"—and of Shahinda's—appeared and gave him a chit which he passed on to Himm.

It was from Shahinda, and demanded Himm's presence at the sanatorium if convenient. This was the first time since her illness that she had called Himm of her own accord.

He went and was ushered into the enclosed verandah where Shahinda used to receive her visitors. She came in and then went out, giving a look round to see that she was not watched. Then she asked Himm what he meant by writing such a rude letter to her.

"It is not a rude letter—it is true !"

"So you have fallen in love with Mabel !"

"Otherwise I should not have been in this place."

"Oh, I see ; you are here because of Mabel. So you love her."

"And will everlastingly."

"Well, men were deceivers ever."

"Not more so than women," he retorted.

"Did you not vow eternal friendship with me. Did we not take that vow in the Church of God ?" she demanded.

"But that does not exclude Mabel, any more than it excludes Yusef."

"Well, it's strange your loving Mabel and me at the same time !"

"No more so than your loving me and Yusef at the same time," he retorted.

"Exactly ! Therefore it is not exclusive."

"All true love is exclusive. But it must be so on both sides."

"Of course ; but my love for Yusef is spiritual. You neglected me, and have driven me into his arms."

Shahinda was unconvinced that she had done anything wrong. She wished to avoid any reference to Yusef, but was trying to persuade Himm not to make a vow with Mabel. Himm, on the other hand, was bent upon making Shahinda realize that, by so doing, he was only following her own example.

"I knew that cat had been carrying on with you for some time. She told me all about your doings with her the other day," Shahinda muttered.

"When she was locked in your bedroom ?"

Shahinda nodded. She was thirsting to say a lot, but did not know what to say. The idea uppermost in her mind was the threatened alliance between Mabel and Himm, which she intended to resist at all cost. She wanted to persuade Himm to concede the point that, while her own platonic love for Himm was consistent with her professed platonic love for Yusef, Himm's was not.

Himm showed impatience to go ; it involved an effort to tear himself from Shahinda's presence, but it was part of his projected "cure."

It was now Shahinda's turn to feel the pang of separation. She tried to prolong the conversation, but Himm showed that he was anxious to hurry away to keep another engagement.

Shahinda again and again protested that her love for Himm did not affect her love for Yusef, that Himm had been neglecting her, and that since he had met Mabel, his attitude towards her had changed for the worse. She was in the midst of this complaint when Himm looked at his watch and held out his hand to say good-bye.

"When are you going home?" she asked.

"It depends!" he answered carelessly.

"Upon Mabel, I suppose?"

"More or less."

"Then I count no longer in your plans?"

"You do—when you wish to come into them again."

"Thanks for small mercies! Himm, I wanted to consult you about a confidential matter."

"Consult me? Shahinda, that is an unexpected pleasure—and on a confidential matter. You have never wasted your confidence upon me before—why now?"

"Himm, don't be so cruel! I will give Yusef up if you object to it."

"I object to no one. Let Cæsar hold what Cæsar held—that is all I want."

Shahinda would have prolonged the talk, but Himm felt that, as his first "dose" was working, he must give it time to act. So he cut short the conversation and left.

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## CHAPTER XXXIX

### SHAHINDA'S CONFIDENCE

WHEN Himm reached home, he remembered Mabel, with whom he had made an appointment. He wanted to telephone his apologies to her, but learnt that she had already left.

She had, in fact, gone to Shahinda, who had sent a message—immediately after Himm had left—asking Mabel to see her, as she was unwell.

Mabel found Shahinda in a state of great agitation, and on her entry she burst into tears. It was the first time for many months that Shahinda had given vent to her emotions.

After a preliminary talk, Shahinda turned angrily to Mabel, and accused her of carrying on with Himm. She told Mabel that Himm was an inveterate flirt, and toyed with the feelings of women, whom he deserted one by one. She herself was the latest victim of his dalliance.

Mabel agreed, for she was anxious that Shahinda should break off with Himm.

Shahinda asked her if she was going to become one with Himm, but Mabel denied it, though she confessed to feeling some admiration for him. She was far from willing to pledge her troth to him, she said, though he was so gallant a cavalier.

The women were sparring with each other, for

Shahinda's objective was that Mabel should give up Himm, while Mabel was trying to press home the moral of her own lesson.

One thing was clear to Shahinda, that, unless she retrieved her position immediately, Himm was about to transfer his affections to Mabel. What was she to do? Had Himm so completely changed, within so short a time, as to keep on consulting his watch all the time he was speaking to her. Should she quarrel—or should she make up with him?

When Mabel left, Shahinda wrote to Himm asking him to come over, as she had something important to say.

Mabel, in the meantime, rang up Himm, to make good the appointment he had missed on the previous day. He wrote truthfully to Shahinda that he must see Mabel first, but would call on her some time between three and five. This was a blow to Shahinda! So Mabel was already placed above her! She could not bear it; she would go to Himm and persuade him in the privacy of his home.

She went, but Himm was just about to start on his visit to Mabel.

"Hallo, Shahinda, have you lost your way?"

"No, I have lost my head," she replied.

"You did that some time ago."

"Himm," she said sobbing, "I am very worried; do speak to me in private."

"Why do you require privacy with me?"

"Don't be cruel! Do sit down while I talk."

"But I have an appointment with Mabel," he protested.

"Well, you can keep the appointment with *your* Mabel—I shan't detain you long!"

Shahinda snatched up the receiver and telephoned to Mabel that she had to consult Himm upon important business, so would she excuse him if he was delayed a few minutes? Mabel had no objection, though it was the second time that Himm had failed to keep his appointment. But she would excuse him, for Shahinda's sake.

"Himm, I want you to give up Mabel, if you really love me, or——"

"Give you up, if I love her?"

"Y-e-s ! How unkind you are, Himm, to think like that. Have I grown old and ugly that you wish to give me up now?"

"Your youth and beauty were no allurements to me. Their absence is no handicap now."

"Then why do you wish to be made one with Mabel?"

"For the same reason that I am one with you."

"How can you be one with two of us?"

"Shahinda, I have explained to you so often that the ocean of pure love is illimitable, and that more than one person may swim in it."

"You mean that you can love us both alike?"

"Why not?"

"But if we fight?" she asked laughing.

"That will not worry me, I shall be friendly to both."

"But if you have to give up one of us?"

"I will think of that contingency when it arises."

"There you are, Himm ! I was thinking of it all the time. You want to give me up, don't you?"

"It may, perhaps, be unnecessary."

"Do you mean to imply that I shall die?"

"Or pass out of my sight."

This staggered Shahinda, who burst into tears. She flung herself upon Himm, hugged and kissed him, and for the first time since her illness, threw herself on his lap, as she used to do of old.

Himm felt that his cure was taking effect, and that she was realizing the hypocrisy of her life. But he must apportion his doses !

He moved Shahinda aside, stood up, and turned to go. Shahinda asked where he was going and he pointed to a direction of the compass. She understood !

"Himm, I don't like these platonic friendships. In fact, I never could understand them."

"I thought you understood nothing else."

"Well, they are all right in a way, but—but—I don't like them."

"What about Yusef ?" he enquired.

Shahinda took out of her satchel a note, and passed it to Himm.

"Did you write that letter to Yusef, congratulating him on his marriage to me ?" she demanded fiercely.

"Who told you that it referred to his proposal to marry you ?"

"What else could it refer to ?"

Himm explained that the old man wanted to marry off his daughter, but was hard up for cash, as he always was, and that he had previously bespoken Himm's good offices.

The word "marriage" in his note, and his own pencilled "congratulations" referred to that marriage.

This took Shahinda's breath away. She protested that Yusef had told her, again and again, that it referred to herself, and that she had been acting

throughout upon that assumption. She had believed that Himm had paid Yusef to marry her. She resolved to get square with Yusef, which Himm advised her not to do.

"Well, Himm, I'm not going back to the sanatorium," she said.

"Then what will you do?"

"I will do anything you tell me!"

"Will you really?"

Himm had found lately that Shahinda's promises were writ in sand. She would make a promise, and when it suited her, would deny it. He decided to give her more time to think.

"I will give you three days to think about it."

"I don't want three minutes now!" she retorted tactfully.

"But I want three days to think about you," he replied.

"I will agree, but only on condition that you don't see Mabel. She is a witch."

Shahinda was importunate, and Himm knew that it was not her usual sedate nature. She had become excited, and her trouble had returned. So he gave her the safe promise that he would try to avoid Mabel. Then he took Shahinda back to the sanatorium, and consulted Dr. Oldenburg as to whether she could be removed safely. He engaged her passage, and took her to Biarritz, where she obtained the needed rest from her worries and effected a good cure.

But her life had been too arduous to restore her shattered nerves, and they were overstimulated at the slightest provocation. Her temperament, once so serene, became easily irritable; her appearance,



once so cheerful, became pathetically phlegmatic ; her utterances, once free, became so restrained as to be incomprehensible.

She was not the same Shahinda, nor was Himm the same to her. She began to be suspicious of his every act. She would impute to him statements he never made. Her rabid persecution had settled down to a mild but more uniform oppression.

Himm tried to wean her out of a habit which had become a chronic malady. His love for her became intensified with each ebullition of her temper, but it was mingled with sadness and sorrow. He made ample provision for her comfort, and provided her with every diversion.

But some innate unsatisfied desire appeared to be tormenting her. In one of her cheerful moments she recounted the pleasures of the past, the days she had spent with her lover.

"Himm, what shall I do?" she begged.

"Stay with me, and be my love!" he cried.

Himm completed his marriage with Shahinda, for their souls had already been united. The further ritual, and the normal completion of that marriage, transformed Shahinda, and belied the doctor. She now became her old self again—the Shahinda who had ever been to Himm his only love.

THE END

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